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The Call of the Sidhe: Poetic and Mythological Influences in Ireland's Struggle for Freedom

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“The Call of the Sidhe: Poetic and Mythological Influences in
Ireland's Struggle for Freedom”**

written by

Anna Wakeling

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the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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The Call of the Sidhe: Poetic and Mythological Influences in Ireland's Struggle for Freedom

Anna Wakeling

The host is riding from Knocknarea (Maeve's tomb)
 And over the grave of Clooth-na-bare; (fairy who drowned herself in Lough Ia, Sligo)
 Caolte tossing his burning hair (Caoilte mac Ronáin, Finn's favorite warrior)
 And Niamh calling *Away, come away:*
Empty your heart of its mortal dream.
The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are a-gleam,
Our arms are waving, our lips are apart;
And if any gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and the deed of his hand,
We come between him and the hope of his heart.
 The host is rushing 'twixt night and day,
 And where is there hope or deed as fair?
 Caolte tossing his burning hair,
 And Niamh calling *Away, come away.*

— “The Hosting of the Sidhe,” Yeats, written 1893 / published 1906¹

“I believe when I am in the mood that all nature is full of people whom we cannot see, and that some of these are ugly or grotesque, and some wicked or foolish, but very many beautiful beyond any one we have ever seen, and that these are not far away when we are walking in quiet and pleasant places. Even when I was a boy I could never walk in a wood without feeling that at any moment I might find before me somebody or something I had long looked for without knowing what I looked for.” — Yeats, writ. 1902 / pub. 1902²

¹ James Pethica, *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*, 23

² Pethica 190

Thesis: Ireland's poetic heritage and legendary heroes provided powerful inspiration for her freedom fighters during times of English domination.

The mythology of Ireland is millennia old, birthing a poetic tradition that has endured with the nation. This presentation explores how important Ireland's mythological heritage has been to its people, sustaining their fighting spirit during foreign invasions, political instability, and conflicts with England. The work of William Butler Yeats, in particular, embodies the struggles between the Protestant Ascendancy and the native Irish; Christianity and paganism; the Gaelic poetic tradition and newer English literature; and the push for peaceful independence negotiation versus the radical revolutionary movements inspired by ancient heroes. His life and poetry serve as a lens that brings the expanse of Ireland's tumultuous history into focus.

The oldest Irish myths reach back at least to 300 BC,³ but the legends I will relate within this paper are abbreviated versions of some of the more recent myths, drawn from those elements on which most stories agree.⁴ The common thread begins in prehistory, when legends say the island was ruled by a misshapen demon race called the Fomorians.⁵ After them came the Firbolgs, escaped Greek slaves who, along with the remaining Fomorians, were quickly overrun by the first significant group of invaders: the Tuatha de Danaan.⁶

These newcomers are an example of historical myth—they were evidently real invaders who retook their ancestral lands from a rival branch of their family, but “[n]o family traces its connection to the De Danaan people; they wholly disappear, and are in later times regarded as gods, or demons, or fairies.”⁷ They allegedly brought four powerful items with them when they invaded: the Stone of Destiny (which sits on Tara and was used in later coronation rituals⁸); the sword of their king, Nuada; the spear of Lugh the Long-handed; and the cauldron of their harp-loving god, Dagda.⁹ These symbols later became very important to Yeats, who saw the de

3 Eric Nelson, “Folklore,” *celtic.org*

4 Part of Ireland's storytelling tradition allows each teller to expand on a tale's skeleton, adding details as they occur to him, which eventually creates as many different versions of the same myth as there are storytellers to recount it. Likewise, many of the spellings of early figures' names vary depending on the writer.

5 Nelson, “Irish Mythological Cycle,” *celtic.org*; Arthur Cotterell, “The Fomorii,” *The Encyclopedia of Mythology*, 131

6 Nelson, “Irish Cycle”; Cotterell, “The Firbolg,” 131

7 Douglas Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland from Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 283 (n. 2)

8 Anthony Murphy, “Tara,” *mythicalireland.com*

9 Nelson, “Irish Cycle”

Danaan era as a repository of true Irishness. This highly mythical approach paints the Tuatha as gods who roamed the land openly until the arrival of the Milesian mortals, at which point they retreated into hiding.¹⁰ After the Milesians dispossessed them, “[t]hey ... retired ... into the green hills and mounds, ... often appearing amongst the Milesian population ... from this out they are confounded with the *Sidhe* [Shee], or spirits, now called fairies, and to this very day I have heard old men, when speaking of the fairies who inhabit ancient raths and interfere occasionally in mortal concerns ..., call them ... the Tuatha de Danaan.”¹¹ Nor is this belief likely to go away soon, even if it is now only upheld for old times' sake. In 2012, my Irish tour guide, Dave, pointed out the lone, scrubby trees occasionally seen in the midst of a farmer's field and informed us that those were called fairy trees; it was terrible luck to cut them down because the fairies supposedly meet there. One of his favorite explanations for such an anecdote was, “We Irish are a very superstitious people.”

The Milesians are the first human group to enter the stories permanently. Douglas Hyde believes that the Red Branch and Heroic (Ulster) cycles of Milesian myth are where the historically plausible stories of Ireland begin,¹² when their king Eremon won control of a united Ireland by defeating his southern co-ruler and brother Eber Finn and established the High-king's headquarters at Tara.¹³ An example of the glorious hyperbole found in the retelling of myths is the following description of Conairé Mor (the Great), one of the earliest Milesian High-kings about whom there is much recorded detail.

I saw there a couch, ... and its ornamentation was more beautiful than all the other couches of the Court, it is curtained round with silver cloth, and the couch itself is richly ornamented. ... [I]n the middle was a noble champion. He has in his visage the ardour and action of a sovereign, and the wisdom of an historian. The cloak which I saw upon him can be likened only to the mist of a May morning. A different colour and complexion are seen on it each moment, more splendid than the other is each hue. I saw in the cloak in front of him a wheel broach of gold, that reaches from his chin to his waist. Like unto the sheen of burnished gold is the color of his hair. Of all of the human forms of the world that I have seen his is the most splendid. I saw his gold-hilted sword laid down near him. There was the breadth of a man's hand of the sword exposed out of the scabbard. From that hand's breadth the man who sits at the far end of

10 Ibid.

11 Hyde 284

12 Ibid. 293, 295

13 Nelson, “Irish Cycle”

the house could see even the smallest object by the light of that sword.
More melodious is the melodious sound of that sword than the melodious
sounds of the golden pipes which play music in the royal house. ...¹⁴

Conairé is said to be contemporary with Conor mac Nessa,¹⁵ around whose reign the popular legends really start to gather. Hyde tentatively places Conor, his stepfather Fergus mac Roigh, and Cúchulainn, Conor's mightiest champion, between 134 and 33 BC.¹⁶ The poet Padraic Colum offers a brief account of Conor in his annotated edition of Sir Samuel Ferguson's poetry:

Conor, king of Ulster, contemporary and rival of Maev, Queen of Connaught, reigned at Emania (now the Navan), near Armagh, about the commencement of the Christian era. He owed his first accession to the monarchy to the arts of his mother Nessa, on whom Fergus, his kingly predecessor and step-father, doted so fondly that she had been enabled to stipulate, as a condition of bestowing her hand, that Fergus should abdicate after a year in favour of her youthful son. The year had been indefinitely prolonged by the fascinations of Nessa aided by the ability of Conor, who, although he concealed a treacherous and cruel disposition under attractive graces of manners and person, ultimately became too popular to be displaced; and Fergus, whose nature disinclined him to the labours of government, had acquiesced in accepting as an equivalent the excitements of war and chase, and the unrestricted pleasure of the revel. ... he long remained a faithful supporter of the throne of his step-son, eminent for his valour, generosity, and fidelity, as well as for his accomplishments as a hunter and a poet.¹⁷

Yeats renders the incident in verse, from the perspective of an aged Fergus asking a druid for advice on his remaining years.

FERGUS

The whole day have I followed in the rocks,
And you have changed and flowed from shape to shape.
First as a raven on whose ancient wings
Scarcely a feather lingered, then you seemed
A weasel moving on from stone to stone,
And now at last you wear a human shape —
A thin gray man half lost in gathering night.

DRUID

What would you, king of the proud Red Branch kings?

14 Hyde 390-91

15 Nelson, "Irish Cycle"

16 Hyde 401-02

17 Padraic Colum, *The Poems of Samuel Ferguson*, 23

FERGUS

This would I say, most wise of living souls:
Young subtle Concobar sat close by me
When I gave judgment, and his words were wise,
And what to me was burden without end,
To him seemed easy, so I laid the crown
Upon his head to cast away my care.

(Conor)

DRUID

What would you, king of the proud Red Branch kings?

FERGUS

I feast amid my people on the hill,
And pace the woods, and drive my chariot wheels
In the white border of the murmuring sea;
And still I feel the crown upon my head.

DRUID

What would you?

FERGUS

I would no more be a king,
But learn the dreaming wisdom that is yours.

DRUID

Look on my thin gray hair and hollow cheeks,
And on these hands that may not lift the sword,
This body trembling like a wind-blown reed.
No maiden loves me, no man seeks my help,
Because I be not of the things I dream.

FERGUS

A wild and foolish laborer is a king,
To do and do and do, and never dream.

DRUID

Take, if you must, this little bag of dreams;
Unloose the cord and they will wrap you round.

FERGUS

I see my life go dripping like a stream
From change to change; I have been many things —
A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
A king sitting upon a chair of gold,
And all these things were wonderful and great;
But now I have grown nothing, being all,
And the whole world weighs down upon my heart —

Ah! Druid, Druid, how great webs of sorrow
Lay hidden in the small slate-coloured thing!

— “Fergus and the Druid,” Yeats, writ. 1892 / pub. 1895¹⁸

It seems that Conor took his stepfather's loyalty too much for granted. In a dispute over Deirdre, a young girl who had been Conor's promised wife but had run away with a younger man because she was afraid of the now middle-aged king, Conor persuaded Fergus to go after her and her three escorts by swearing not to hurt them. Fergus brought them back, repeating Conor's promise of safe-conduct, whereupon the king returned Deirdre to her solitary confinement and promptly executed the three sons of Usnach (one of whom had been Deirdre's lover). Fergus was so angry that he seceded with his warriors to Connacht, where he helped Maeve in her raid on Ulster for the Dun Bull of Cuailgne.¹⁹ In the meantime, Conor's young champion Cúchulainn had achieved his full strength and served as Ulster's captain for many years.

The story of Cúchulainn began with a boy named Setanta [pronounced “STAN-ta”], who was the best at hurling of any boy in the region.²⁰ He won all their hurling championships, and no one else was any competition. His uncle, Conor mac Nessa, was going on a trip, and Setanta (now part of the court) went after them once he had finished his hurling game. Conor was staying far away with a man named Cúlainn. Setanta took his *camán* (hurling stick) and *sliotar* (hurling ball) and started out.

Cúlainn had a ferocious guard dog that he let loose to watch his property every night once the gates were shut. The giant dog could kill armed men with no trouble, so everyone in the surrounding area made no attempt to come within Cúlainn's fence once the gate was shut for the night. Setanta, being a stranger, did not know this. He arrived at the gate after it was shut, so he looked for another way in. He scaled the fence and jumped down inside; the dog heard him and rushed toward him to tear him apart. Setanta panicked and took his hurling gear and flung the *sliotar* straight at the dog's head, and it killed him. He went on up to Cúlainn's hall.

The king and his host were shocked to see the boy there, since he had not been let in before the gates closed. Cúlainn asked Setanta if his dog had not met him. Setanta answered

18 Pethica 13-14

19 Hyde 317-19

20 Dave explained, “If you want to know what hurling looks like, just imagine a combination of lacrosse, football, and wrestling.”

regretfully that he had killed the dog, having feared for his life. Both men were amazed that he had not only survived the encounter, but actually managed to kill the fearsome dog. Setanta offered his services to guard Cúlainn's land in payment for the dog's death. Cúlainn agreed, and since Setanta was to serve in place of a new dog, he was renamed Cúchulainn (Cúlainn's Hound).²¹

Hyde calls the Cúchulainn myths “the great pseudo-historic cycle of storytelling,” also lumping into this category Maeve and the Fenians.²² The stories about Maeve are either very long or very short and trivial, so we will leave her with the observation that she is the greatest non-divine female character in the Irish mythological cycle, and also one of the strongest rulers. More influential for later revolutionaries, however, was the fabled Fenian order.

Opinions on Fenian origins vary: they are said to be spirits, mercenaries, or (most plausibly to Hyde) the Ulster king's specially trained standing army. Records of their initiation and mode of life reconstruct them as a body resembling Japan's Samurai.²³ A more exaggerated record of their legendary might appears in this list of requirements to join their elite corps:

- Be versed in the Twelve Books of Poetry
- Be able to compose Gaelic poetry
- Be half-buried and fend off spears thrown by nine warriors with only a shield and a hazel stick without injury
- Evade Fenian pursuit through a forest without breaking a twig or disturbing one hair braid
- Jump higher than your head and duck lower than your knee and pull a thorn from your foot whilst running
- Take no dowry with a wife²⁴

We see that even this early in their national development, the Irish had a respect for poetic ability that equaled their estimation of physical might in the composition of an exemplary man. Hyde remarks,

The Fenian tales and poems are extraordinarily numerous, but their conception and characteristics are in general distinctly different from

21 Nelson, “The Birth of a Hero,” *celtic.org*; Dave the tour guide

22 Hyde 56-57

23 Ibid. 370-74

24 Nelson, “Irish Fenian Cycle,” *celtic.org*

those relating to the Red Branch. They have not the same sweep, the same vastness and structure, the same weirdness, as the older cycle. The majority of them are more modern in conception and surroundings. ... Exaggeration does not run through all the stories, but is confined to small parts of them, and is set off by much that is trivial or humorous.

The Fenian stories became in later times the distinctly popular ones. They were far more of the people and for the people than those of the Red Branch. They were most intimately bound up with the life and thought and feelings of the whole Gaelic race, high and low, both in Ireland and in Scotland[;] and the development of the Fenian saga, for a period of 1,200 or 1,500 years, is one of the most remarkable examples in the world of continuous literary evolution.²⁵

The most famous Fenians to whom Hyde introduces his readers inhabit the AD 200s and 300s. "At the end of the third century we come upon three or four names of vast repute in Irish history ... These are the great Cormac mac Art himself, ... Finn mac Cúmhail his son-in-law and captain; Ossian, Finn's son; Fergus, Ossian's brother, and Caoilte [Cweeltya] mac Ronáin."²⁶ The most talked-about figure of this group is undoubtedly Fionn himself. Despite his larger-than-life stature in legend, Fionn was not actually a giant as some tales would have us believe, but a very intelligent warrior and a good leader.²⁷ Hyde asserts, "... so early as the seventh century Finn was looked on as a popular hero,"²⁸ and, "Finn has long since [the growth of his body of legends] become to all ears a pan-Gaelic champion just as Arthur has become a Brythonic one."²⁹ Hyde's initial concern with Fionn, as with many other myths and mythical figures, is to unearth the historical element in the stories before he treats the stories themselves. As with any ancient tale, he is emphatic that the reader be able to distinguish history from embellishment in the old Irish myths, instead of discrediting a whole story just because some references to fairies and other marvels are sprinkled throughout an otherwise valid narrative.³⁰

The myth of how Fionn attained his greatness is connected with the River Shannon, which flows through the heartland of western Ireland. It was traditionally named after the maiden Sinann, who broke a sacred taboo by trying to catch and eat the salmon who had consumed the

25 Hyde 374-75

26 Ibid. 246

27 Ibid. 379 (n. 1)

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid. 383

30 Ibid. 382-83, 440-41

hazelnuts of knowledge (in order to absorb its wisdom into herself) and was drowned as punishment.³¹ Fionn, called Demne at birth, later ate the salmon himself and was renamed Fionn (“bright”) because the druid with him saw the light of wisdom that appeared in his eyes, which later enabled him to take on the leadership of the Fianna.³² This group was not, however, named after him, despite the visual similarity between “Fionn” and “Fianna.”³³

Apparently each kingdom under the *Ard-righ* (High-king) maintained its own troop of Fianna, or Fenians, for obvious reasons: they were always at war. For example, the Munster and Leinster Fenians had a quarrel with Cairbré of the Liffey, currently High-king of Ireland, and besieged Tara, moving the king to call for help from Connacht and Scotland.³⁴ Connacht and Ulster teamed up with Tara in battle to punish the king of Leinster for marrying both of the High-king's daughters through deception, leading to their deaths. Tara forced Leinster to pay a hefty tribute for many years, provoking fights in which Fionn (the head Fenian and the Ulster king's top warrior) sided with his Leinster countrymen.³⁵ Cairbré the High-king eventually proved victorious over the Ulster Fenians, leaving few survivors besides Caoilte and Ossian [Oisín].³⁶ (It would be about this time that the myth of Oisín's 300-year disappearance in the company of Niamh, a Danaan girl, was set.³⁷) Fionn himself, left with only a handful of his formerly fearsome band, is said to have gone into a King Arthur-style hibernation until the day appointed for him to rouse the Fianna and restore Ireland to the glory it knew under him.³⁸ As for their peacetime duties before their decline, “[i]t appears to have been partly to check [pirate] raids ... that the High-kings maintained the Fenians a couple of centuries [after the plundering of Tara during Conaire's reign], for their chief duty was to 'watch the harbors.'”³⁹

These glory days of martial prowess had little time left after Fionn's famous life, as Hyde declares the “power of the Red Branch knights (the Fianna) ... decisively overthrown” in AD 331, though he does not specify how.⁴⁰ It may have had something to do with the rise of a more

31 Ibid. 447-48

32 Nelson, “The Salmon of Knowledge,” *celtic.org*

33 Hyde 364 (n. 1)

34 Ibid. 376-78

35 Ibid. 393-94

36 Ibid. 383

37 Nelson, “Fenian Cycle”

38 Ibid.

39 Hyde 389 (n. 1)

40 Ibid. 32-33

centralized government in 379, when Niall of the Nine Hostages (Niall Noígiallach) began his reign at Tara, founding the legendary Ui Néill dynasty.⁴¹ Across the Irish Sea, a much less conspicuous event had happened in 353, according to Hyde: St. Patrick was born.⁴²

As unexciting as the birth of one more Welsh baby would have seemed to the Irish, had they known of it, his life was to have much greater influence on their future than even the founding of a dynasty that would last roughly six hundred years. In the 400s, Patrick returned to the land where he had been enslaved as a boy, this time as a free man bringing the gospel to the animistic Irish.⁴³ Hyde, with characteristic big-picture perspective, observes that the outburst of Christianity in Ireland, “glorious and enduring as it was, carried with it, like all sudden and powerful movements, an element of danger. It was unfortunately destined in its headlong course to overflow its legitimate barriers and to come into rude contact with the civil power which had been established upon lines more ancient and not wholly sympathetic.”⁴⁴ Patrick was not ignorant of these difficulties, but he loved his new home. His affection for his converts, applied particularly to a number who had been captured by an invading kind, is gorgeously expressed in the letter he wrote their captor to plead for their release: “Oh! My most beautiful and most loving brothers and children whom in countless numbers I have begotten in Christ, what shall I do for you? ... Is it a crime to have been born in Ireland?” Hyde notes, a bit more wryly than usual, “This is certainly the first time on record that this question — so often repeated since in so many different forms — was asked.”⁴⁵

“By the middle of the sixth century Ireland had been honeycombed from shore to shore with schools, monasteries, colleges, and foundations of all kinds belonging to the Christian community, and books had been multiplied to a marvellous extent. At the same time the professional bards flourished in such numbers that Keating says that ‘nearly a third of the men of Ireland belonged, about that period, to the poetic order.’” Many of these left us “the non-Christian literature of poem and saga — mostly anonymous.”⁴⁶ Of course, the presence of so many churches and monasteries made a tempting target for the bandits from over the sea. With so

41 S.J. Connolly, “Niall Noígiallach,” *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, 408 and “Ui Néill,” 588-89; Hyde 34-36

42 Hyde 581

43 Ibid. 76

44 Ibid. 225

45 Ibid. 145

46 Ibid. 193-94

many of their monastery-schools constantly getting raided by Norsemen and later by the Norsemen's descendants, the English, it is hardly a wonder that the Irish have had little love for Englishmen since even before the Elizabethan and Cromwellian invasions.⁴⁷ Along with monetary treasures, many legend-bearing manuscripts were lost during these robberies — a sore blow to the word-loving Irish.⁴⁸

St. Patrick's legacy of founding schools made Ireland a beacon of education during the Dark Ages.⁴⁹ Unlike the Christian enforcers who came after him, he was interested in native myths and wanted them to be remembered; he saw their cultural value.⁵⁰ Hyde believes early Irish schools to have “taught the heathen classics and the Irish language side by side with the Scriptures and theology,” as “[t]here is no other possible way of accounting for the admirable scholarship of the men whom they turned out, and for their skill in Latin and often also in Irish poetry.”⁵¹ “The classic tradition ... burst out into full flower in the Isle of Saints, and the Renaissance began in Ireland 700 years before it was known in Italy. During these centuries Ireland was the asylum of the higher learning which took sanctuary there from the uncultured states of Europe.”⁵² One example that Hyde gives to verify these somewhat melodramatic claims is that Irish monks kept up the study of Greek at a time when the dearth of learning in Europe was so severe that many high churchmen had never learned it.⁵³ St. Patrick himself, though he “was essentially a man of work and not a man of letters, ... is the earliest Irish writer of whom we can say with confidence that what is ascribed to him is really his,” insists Hyde.⁵⁴

Unlike Christian institutions, druidic bard schools consisted of a caravan that followed its master wherever he went; the locals where they stopped were obligated by tradition to provide for them.⁵⁵ The extreme reverence of Irish culture for the poet's vocation allowed many bards to extort money from the people, under pain of being immortalized in satire if someone refused.⁵⁶ As Christian schools replaced bardic instruction, however, the definitions of poet and historian

47 Ibid. 204, 207, 209, 211-13

48 Ibid. 279

49 Ibid. 134

50 Ibid. 383

51 Ibid. 215

52 Ibid. 216

53 Ibid. 217-18

54 Ibid. 135

55 Ibid. 239-40

56 Ibid. 188-89

began to diverge into separate branches, and with this split went some of the druids' power.⁵⁷ Hyde is uncertain how to classify the druids, seeing them as more of an elite, educated governing class than an organized religious order. They were universally sought out as wise men; Fionn mac Cúmhail was sent as a child to be trained by one,⁵⁸ and this is probably not an isolated occasion. They seem to have been responsible for mediating between the people and nature, using their poetic powers to achieve seemingly magical results.⁵⁹ Ancient bards allegedly knew poems that tracked stolen property, gave long life, and, of course, cursed rulers who would not pay their poets.⁶⁰ Scraps of legend indicate that druids made special sacrifices — animals for gaining information from the gods, and children for obtaining material blessings on the people — until Patrick put a stop to this.⁶¹ The ancient Irish had said “a man could not be a judge without being an historian.”⁶² Of course, “historian” and “poet” meant the same thing, giving druids the triply great power of judge, historian, and poet (“druid” and “poet” are often synonymous in older writings).⁶³ Conor mac Nessa is said to have ended the tradition of bards as judges;⁶⁴ even so, druids still had massive influence that they were not keen on giving up as Christianity immersed more and more of Ireland.

Besides the new, sedentary method of education, other miscellaneous innovations that accompanied Christianity include the round towers in which the Irish sheltered their treasures from the Danes,⁶⁵ and the fancy knots which are called “Celtic” today but were actually a Byzantine import; indigenous Irish designs were far simpler and consisted greatly of spirals and circles. The craftsmanship of pagan bronzeworks contrasts with the crudeness of later early Christian ones, possibly evidence that pagan smiths did not want to work for the Christian newcomers.⁶⁶

A new, graver evidence of friction between nativists and Christians arose in 554, when the Féis (national assembly) ended because St. Ruadhan cursed Tara over a quarrel with the

57 Ibid. 240

58 Nelson, “Salmon of Knowledge”

59 Hyde 82-89

60 Ibid. 241-42

61 Ibid. 92-93 (There is, however, no absolutely definitive evidence that Hyde could see for the human sacrifices.)

62 Ibid. 73

63 Ibid. 84-89

64 Ibid. 240-41

65 Ibid. 459

66 Ibid. 454-56

High-king.⁶⁷

The great palace where, according to general belief, a hundred and thirty-six pagan and six Christian kings had ruled uninterruptedly, the most august spot in all Ireland, ... was now to be given up and deserted at the curse of a tonsured monk. The great Assembly or Féis of Tara, which accustomed the people to the idea of a centre of government and a ruling power, could no more be convened, and a thousand associations and memories which hallowed the office of the High-king were snapped in a moment. It was a blow from which the monarchy of Ireland never recovered, a blow which, by putting an end to the great triennial or septennial conventions of the whole Irish race, weakened the prestige of the central ruler, increased the power of the provincial chieftains, segregated the clans of Ireland from one another, and opened a new road for faction and dissension throughout the entire island.⁶⁸

This was not at all in St. Patrick's peaceful tradition. Kings regarded saints' curses as having inexorable power; whereas previously, in the case of a druidic king-cursing, the seven poets required to be present must each have one of seven poetic "degrees": *ollamh*, *anrad*, *clí*, *cana*, *doss*, *focloc*, and *macfuirmedh* (in that order).⁶⁹ The fact that the curse of one Christian monk carried the same weight as that of seven druids showed how rapidly Christianity was capsizing the religiopolitical power structure in Ireland. With the death in 558 of Diarmuid, the High-king under whom Tara had been cursed, the hill was finally abandoned.⁷⁰

In 900, Viking raids increased, along with the capture and sale of many Irish as slaves to new homes as far as Constantinople.⁷¹ The High-king's position was weak, but it received one last shot of adrenaline in the person of Brian Boru. He was a local king who acceded to the throne of Munster and began campaigning to unite all of Ireland under his control.⁷² Brian's military victories, hostage treaties, and power plays within the Church led to the national acknowledgment of his High-kingship in 1002.⁷³ In his court at Kincora as described by the poet Mac Liag, Brian was flanked on his throne by the kings of Ulster and Connacht, the king of Leinster sat at the door closest to him, and he himself represented Munster.⁷⁴ Ireland, however,

⁶⁷ Ibid. 226-27

⁶⁸ Ibid. 226

⁶⁹ Ibid. 235-37, 242-43

⁷⁰ Ibid. 232-34

⁷¹ Bryce Evans, "Modern Ireland" Lecture 1

⁷² Connolly, "Brian Bóruma (Boru)," 61

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hyde 431, 437-38

was only to enjoy his consolidated rule for twelve years. Restless subordinate kings united to throw off his authority, leading to his fall at Clontarf in 1014, according to S.J. Connolly;⁷⁵ Hyde maintains that Brian was leading a united front to save Ireland from Danish conquest.⁷⁶ There is partial truth in both perspectives, since Brian's opponents had assembled Viking aid, but he had previously shown himself quite willing to do the same.⁷⁷ Regarding Brian's legacy, Hyde gushingly quotes an earlier historian:

[Brian Boru] was, in sooth, one of the three best that ever were born in Erin, and one of the three men who most caused Erin to prosper, namely, Lugh the Long-handed, and Finn mac Cúmhail [Cool], and Brian, son of Kennedy; for it was he that released the men of Erin and its women from the bondage and iniquity of the foreigners and the pirates. It was he that gained five-and-twenty battles over the foreigners, and who killed them and banished them. ... In short, Erin fell by the death of Brian.⁷⁸

It is interesting that out of the three figures mentioned here, only Brian is the indubitably historical one. Hyde thus elevates him to the level of legend, which may be a little sentimentally revisionist; but he *was* a much-loved and respected king for many years after his death.⁷⁹ The harp on the Irish Euro coin represents Brian, who was himself a minstrel⁸⁰ and patron of native arts, Celtic culture, and education.⁸¹

Despite his popularity, the manner in which Brian attained his position was detrimental to the already tenuous long-term unity of the Irish nation. Because he had seized the High-kingship as an outsider, rather than being elected from within the favored Uí Néill, he set a precedent for any number of local kings aspiring to Tara: that they too had a chance of becoming the High-king if they could simply amass a larger following than any of their rival rulers had. This mentality left the island even more factionalized than before and unable to defend itself when the Normans came.⁸² Helping this growing problem was the already-entrenched mindset of localism which Hyde describes as follows: "... [T]he nearness or remoteness of some common ancestor bound a

75 Connolly, "Brian Bóruma," 61

76 Hyde 442

77 Connolly, "Brian Bóruma," 61

78 Hyde 439

79 Connolly, "Brian Bóruma," 61-62

80 Dave the tour guide

81 Hyde 443-45

82 Ibid. 452-53

number of clans in nearer or remoter alliance to one another.”⁸³ The more common ancestors you shared with other clans, the more allies you had in your bid for the throne if you chose to pursue it.

In 1022, Malachy the Great died.⁸⁴ He had been Brian's chief rival for control of Leinster⁸⁵ and one of the last major rulers on whom the Irish could potentially depend in case of an invasion. Sure enough, in 1100, the Normans finally came to stay.⁸⁶ Their hold on England was already secure, and Pope Adrian IV lent his assistance toward the equivalent domination of the Irish by naming Henry II of England lord of Ireland as well. The idea was that this would centralize Church power in the British Isles.⁸⁷ In 1260 the Normans further defeated the disunited Irish at the Battle of Downpatrick.⁸⁸ Like a true bibliognost, Hyde is quick to lament the deleterious effect of Norman occupation on the traditional reproduction of Irish texts:

Like all the other arts of civilised life, that of the illuminator and decorative scribe was brought to a standstill by the Norman warriors, nor do the Irish appear after this period to have produced a single page worth the reproduction of the artistic paleographer. The reason of this, no doubt, was that the Irish artist in former days could — no matter how septs fell out or warring tribes harried one another — count upon the sympathy of his fellow countrymen even when they were hostile. Under the new conditions caused by the Norman settlements in each of the four provinces, he could count on nothing, not even his own life. All confidence was shaken, all peace of mind was gone, the very name of so-called government produced a universal terror, and Ireland became, to use a graphic expression of the Four Masters, a 'trembling sod.' ... 'Since then ... the native character of Ireland has best found expression in her music. ...'⁸⁹

The music did survive, but Irish poets under Norman rule were hard-pressed to find patrons.⁹⁰

A harsher scourge that affected more people than just the artisans was the Black Death of 1300.⁹¹ Following Europe's slow recovery from the plague's decimation, Edward III of England introduced some specifically Anglo-centric laws into the administration of his western island

83 Ibid. 63

84 Ibid. 576

85 Connolly, “Brian Bóruma,” 61

86 Evans Lecture 1

87 Alan Ward, *The Easter Rising: Revolution and Irish Nationalism*, 17

88 Hyde 66

89 Ibid. 463

90 Ibid. 473-74

91 Evans Lecture 1

domain. English colonists in Ireland were forbidden from speaking Irish or assimilating with Irish culture in 1360.⁹² Seven years after this, the Statute of Kilkenny specifically outlawed Anglo-Irish marriages and traditional poetic entertainment. It was not effectively enforced, but the burgeoning sentiment was there.⁹³ As Hyde put it, “The poets were now beginning to feel the rude weight of the prosaic Saxon.”⁹⁴ “The severest acts were passed against them over and over again. The nobles were forbidden to entertain them, in the hope that they might die out or starve ...”⁹⁵ Because so much of Irish myth remained tied to the people personally through their exhaustive genealogical records, trying to stamp out their culture was also a personal attack on their identities.⁹⁶

Beginning in 1465, it was expected that Irish men living within the English sphere of influence in central eastern Ireland (designated the Pale) would adopt English surnames.⁹⁷ Using Irish in court was illegal by 1492.⁹⁸ Poyning's Law of 1494 next took a bite out of the Irish people's political autonomy by requiring that all proposed bills be reviewed and approved by the Crown before the Irish Parliament was allowed to debate them.⁹⁹ The Irish language was still thriving in areas both inside and outside areas of English rule by the 1500s, but the self-appointed Anglo-Saxon overlords did not intend to let it remain so.¹⁰⁰

In 1536 and 1537, Parliament made the newly Protestant Henry VIII head of the Irish church as well as the English one, but the unpopular implementation of Anglican rites moved Ireland to cling to the familiar Catholicism that had now been a part of daily life for centuries.¹⁰¹ The feudalistic “surrender and regrant” land policy of 1541 inched the Irish people's self-sufficiency out from under them and forced their Parliament to acknowledge Henry as their king if they wished to retain any semblance of local authority.¹⁰² When Elizabeth came to power, she was even less subtle in asserting England's eminence. “... the Act of Elizabeth [had] allege[d] one of the usual lying excuses of the Elizabethan period:” namely, that Irish bards sang

92 Hyde 608-09

93 Ibid. 609

94 Ibid. 470

95 Ibid. 493-94

96 Ibid. 59

97 Ibid. 609-10

98 Ibid. 610

99 Ward 19

100 Hyde 610-12

101 Ward 20-21

102 Ibid. 21

lascivious things and would encourage the people to commit crime and immorality if heeded. Edmund Spenser sought to eliminate some of his own poetic competition by casting such aspersions at the bards, and the English who visited Ireland during this time were generally not inclined to correct him.¹⁰³ “Queen Elizabeth I, who tried to eradicate the Gaelic culture during her reign, ordered Irish harpists to be hung wherever found and their instruments smashed,” Rick Steves informs us on his travel blog.¹⁰⁴ Every Ireland-minted euro not only celebrates the musical accomplishments of Brian Boru and his forerunners while Ireland was a free nation, it signifies the enduring quality of Irish music through centuries of national turmoil.

The next opportunity for England to assert its dominance was when Mountjoy put down the O'Neill-O'Donnell rebellion in Ulster, beginning in 1600.¹⁰⁵ The earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell, who were responsible, fled Ireland in the aftermath of the Irish loss at Kinsale in 1607. The “flight of the earls” gave the Crown the perfect excuse to replace their holdings with “plantations” of “settlers, largely Scottish and Presbyterian.”¹⁰⁶ The newcomers “did not intermarry or adopt Irish customs and always remained apart from the Catholic Irish. Those Catholics who did manage to acquire or retain farms in Ulster settled only the poorest land, and there began the economic, social, and religious segregation that has characterized Ulster ever since. There also began that sense of outrage, of colonial exploitation and oppression that still influences Catholics in Northern Ireland.”¹⁰⁷ With these plantations now established, records of exclusively spoken English (or bilingualism at the least) begin to arise in 1609.¹⁰⁸ A traveler in Ireland in 1630 characterized the native intonation as “querulous and whining,” feeding into the image England wanted to project of the Irish language.¹⁰⁹ Amid this shifting ownership of land and of language, Michael O'Clery finished the first edition of *The Annals of the Four Masters* in 1636, one of the most comprehensive and widely-referenced works of ancient Irish mythography used by later scholars.¹¹⁰

In 1641-42, “a bloody uprising that spread to much of Ireland occurred among the native

103 Hyde 494-95

104 Rick Steves, “Irish Soul Music,” ricksteves.com

105 Ward 22

106 Ibid. 23

107 Ibid.

108 Hyde 612-13

109 Ibid. 613

110 Ibid. 576

Irish Catholics of Ulster ...” which was later to earn from Oliver Cromwell the “infamous massacres of Catholics at Drogheda and Wexford.”¹¹¹ This rebellion was kept alive long after its suppression by “annual church services of deliverance ... [which] alerted Irish Protestants to the fundamental disloyalty of their Catholic compatriots ...”¹¹² While radicals attacked the English troops, Rory O'More tried to organize a linguistic resistance by founding an Irish school and press in 1642. Not much apparently came of his efforts.¹¹³

Once Puritan victory over the Royalists had been assured in England, Cromwell returned to Ireland in 1649 for the aforementioned revenge on Wexford and Drogheda's Catholic populations.¹¹⁴ Henceforth, Cromwell's forces targeted civilians in response to scattered guerrilla attacks.¹¹⁵ The 1652 Act of Settlement ordered the “Catholic estates of Ireland ... confiscated and distributed among those who had fought in or financed Cromwell's campaign.”¹¹⁶ Nobles in particular were banished “to hell or to Connacht,” causing many of them to seek relative safety from the vengeful English in the tougher lands west of the Shannon.¹¹⁷ Much of the writing Yeats would come to do is centered on the local folklore of Counties Galway, Sligo, Clare, and Roscommon (all in Connacht). It makes sense that this area would be brimming with old Irish culture, since Cromwell drove so many native families there during his Anglicization campaign. This conquest and occupation, England's most intrusive yet, scattered multitudes of families whose genealogies and lands had been carefully recorded for centuries, leaving only scraps of nostalgic history behind.¹¹⁸ From then on most records were oral or scribbled by minor poets whose writings soon grew obscure. “Just as the ancient history of the Irish began with the distinction between the descendants of the sons of Milesius, ... so on the self-same subject does the literary spirit of the ancient time which had lasted with little alteration from the days of St. Patrick, flare up into light for a brief moment at the opening of the seventeenth century, ere it expired forever under the sword of Cromwell and of William.”¹¹⁹ Yet, later discoveries of the poetry of the time silently uproot England's claims “deny[ing] that there was any real national

111 Ward 24

112 Connolly, “rising of 1641,” 514

113 Hyde 615

114 Ibid.; Evans Lecture 2

115 Evans Lecture 2

116 Ward 24

117 Evans Lecture 2

118 Hyde 562-64

119 Ibid. 517

struggle of Ireland against England in the seventeenth century.”¹²⁰

With the Restoration of the English Crown in 1660, some Catholic property was returned to its original owners, “but eighty percent of Ireland remained in Protestant hands.”¹²¹ Ward quotes O’Farrell: “[T]he Irish occupants lived in a land they no longer owned, and the English owners, by and large, owned a land in which they did not live.”¹²² (Most English landowners with Irish holdings chose to remain in England.) One English monarch who found it expedient to court Ireland’s favor was the deposed James II, who tried to use Ireland as a base to reclaim the Crown.¹²³ William of Orange defeated him at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, and James’ Catholic allies lost even more land.¹²⁴ This was a bleak end to a bloody century, and the writers of the period keenly felt the increased desolation of their nationhood.

With the 1700s came a new crackdown on Irish rights within their own land, in the form of the Penal Laws. An assortment of these mandated the exile of Catholic bishops; the end of primogeniture; and the revocation of basic Catholic rights such as voting, maintaining schools, practicing law, or buying land.¹²⁵ As with earlier laws that placed small restrictions here and there, these were not uniformly enforced, but they existed to remind the Irish of their subordinate position nonetheless.¹²⁶ The Penal Laws’ first few years of implementation also saw the first major Scotch-Irish removal to America.¹²⁷ Hyde relates how the poets responded to this change:

The Irish of the eighteenth century being almost wholly deprived by law of all possibilities of bettering their condition, and having the necessary means of education rigidly denied them, turned for solace to poetry, and in it they vented their wrongs and bitter grief. I have met nothing more painful in literature than the constant, the almost unwavering cry of agony sent out by every one of the Irish writers during the latter half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century. ... In one way the work of the eighteenth century is of even more value to us than that of any earlier age, because it gives us the thoughts and feelings of men who, being less removed from ourselves in point of time, have probably more fully transmitted their own nature to their descendants —

120 Ibid. 525-28

121 Ward 24

122 Ibid. 25

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid. 26

126 Ibid. 27

127 Ibid.; Evans Lecture 2

the Irish of the present day.¹²⁸

England and Scotland officially became Great Britain with the 1707 Act of Union, which meant that Ireland could not be far behind.¹²⁹ Sure enough, in 1720 the British Parliament “asserted its right to legislate for Ireland.”¹³⁰ It repealed most of the Penal Laws between 1778 and 1792, but the Irish still had no appreciable voice in the administration of their own country.¹³¹ The Parliament that currently existed in Dublin had been under Britain's thumb since the fifteenth-century Poyning's Law. Henry Grattan was inspired by America's fledgling representative system and pushed in 1782 for an Irish Parliament following the former colonies' revolutionary model, but he was ignored.¹³²

Naturally, there were those who felt that trying to use the political structure would take too long, when Ireland had gone long enough without its rights. A small group of activists led by Theobald Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet founded the Society of United Irishmen in 1791, which tried to incorporate Irish of all religious persuasions to work together for national freedom, but quickly devolved into violence and conspiracy.¹³³ Landowning Catholics were restored the franchise in 1793 (even though with the Protestant land seizures under Cromwell and the exorbitant taxation that followed, few Catholics were left with their own land), but this small advance was soon to be undone by the SUI's rashness.¹³⁴ The Society's leadership was caught corresponding with France, which had just revolted against its own monarchical structure and was currently at war with Britain; as the principal ringleader, Wolfe Tone was forced to flee to America in 1794.¹³⁵ Repercussions followed when Catholics were again barred from Parliament in 1795, reinstating that part of the Penal Laws.¹³⁶ Frustrated, the Catholic and Protestant halves of the SUI began to attack each other, with the Protestants renaming themselves the Orange Society.¹³⁷ In 1796, Wolfe Tone persuaded France's Directory to help Ireland rebel, but storms kept the French forces from landing at Cork and infighting kept the Irish on the ground from

128 Hyde 591

129 Ward 25-26

130 Ibid. 19

131 Ibid. 28

132 Ibid. 48

133 Ibid.

134 Ibid. 28

135 Ibid. 48-49

136 Ibid. 28-29

137 Ibid. 49

cooperating.¹³⁸ Britain “suspended habeas corpus in its zeal to suppress the Defenders [as the Catholic splinter of the SUI had come to be known].”¹³⁹ The irrepressible freedom fighters tried again in 1798, once again with French aid, but the British handily captured the French invasion force and most of the main Society leaders, including Wolfe Tone, who died in prison.¹⁴⁰ Later generations praised him as “the Father of Irish Nationalism” for his efforts.

The British felt it was time to rein in the unruly Irish even further. In 1800, the Irish Parliament approved the Act of Union, which took effect in 1801 by merging the island nation into Great Britain, adding their own MPs to the British Parliament.¹⁴¹ The independent Irish Parliament was quickly abolished through bribes to its House of Commons.¹⁴² In desperation, Robert Emmet emerged from hiding in 1803 to lead a failed attack on Dublin Castle with only a tenth of the necessary force, for which he was promptly executed.¹⁴³

A new kind of political maneuvering arose in 1823 when Daniel O'Connell, Ireland's first electioneering politician, founded the Catholic Association.¹⁴⁴ Its membership subscriptions raised much support and money for O'Connell's career while giving the previously voiceless Catholics an affordable way to participate in politics.¹⁴⁵ A Catholic himself, O'Connell was denied his seat in Parliament despite winning the 1828 election.¹⁴⁶ However, the influence of the Association won Catholic emancipation from Wellington's administration in 1829, enabling O'Connell to serve his people from within the British government.¹⁴⁷ He was still in the extreme minority; his 1834 bid to repeal the Act of Union was crushed by the other MPs.¹⁴⁸ He busied himself by building grassroots support for this move, founding the Repeal Association in 1840 to replace his banned Catholic Association.¹⁴⁹

The literary front refused to stay silent. Joining writing with politics, Thomas Davis, John B. Dillon, and Charles Gavan Duffy gave voice to the organization they had founded, Young

138 Evans Lecture 2

139 Ward 49

140 Ibid.

141 Ibid. 28-31

142 Evans Lecture 3

143 Ward 49-50

144 Ibid. 36, Evans Lecture 3

145 Ward 36

146 Ibid.

147 Ibid. 36-37

148 Ibid. 37

149 Ibid.

Ireland, by starting the *Nation* newspaper in 1842; their hope was “to expound the view that Ireland was both a geographical and spiritual entity.”¹⁵⁰

The *Nation* ... extolled the heroic image of ancient Ireland and urged the preservation of the Irish language, then spoken by fewer than a quarter of the population [mostly western and southwestern Irish peasants]. England was then accused of having deprived the Irish not only of their culture but of the cultural foundations of the Irish nation itself. Without a culture, there could be no nation. Their purpose, therefore, was to build — or rebuild — an Irish nation by recreating an Irish culture. ... Central to the Young Ireland argument was the view that Irish nationality transcended religion and race. Protestants and Catholics were held to be one in the Irish nation. [Young Ireland's very leadership proved this point; Davis was a Protestant, and Dillon and Duffy were Catholics.] Davis spoke of Ireland as “a nation once again,” and of wanting “to inflame and purify” the Irish with a “lofty and heroic love of country.” But his emphasis upon a Gaelic Ireland was bound to divide the two Irish communities, the Gaelic and the Anglo-Irish.¹⁵¹

Contrasting with these young idealists, “[O'Connell's] nationalism was utilitarian not cultural,”¹⁵² but he was willing to work with them. O'Connell was now ready to drive for repeal with overwhelming force. He named 1843 “Repeal Year” and conducted support rallies known as “monster meetings” because of their prodigious attendance. However, the movement was halted again by Britain's trumped-up arrests of O'Connell and six of his Young Ireland associates.¹⁵³ While he pondered his next move, Ireland's attention left him for an even more pressing concern: the Great Hunger.

The catastrophe known to the rest of the world as the Irish potato famine set in fully in 1845, accompanied by much violence from starving tenant farmers and an inflamed Young Ireland.¹⁵⁴ Thousands of Irish emigrated, anywhere there might be food, on vessels that became known as “coffin ships” because of the high passenger mortality rate.¹⁵⁵ For those who stayed in Ireland, Britain sent significant aid, but much of it arrived through Protestant charities that required Catholic recipients to convert before being fed. Most refused and died Catholic, but those hungry enough to agree were shamed for generations, earning themselves and their

150 Ibid. 57

151 Ibid. 57-58

152 Ibid. 58

153 Ibid. 37

154 Ibid. 38-39

155 Evans Lecture 4

descendants the nickname “souters” because they had betrayed their convictions for a bowl of soup.¹⁵⁶ Ever since the famine, unending debate has raged on whether Britain aided the famine, which could have had a smaller impact had it not been for the government's genocidal motives; what is clear, regardless of the ethnic cleansing perspective, is that the British did not help as much as they could have.¹⁵⁷

In 1847, the height of the famine, O'Connell died and the Repeal Movement faded away in favor of a survival mentality.¹⁵⁸ His legislative prowess and immense popularity earned him the title of “The Liberator,” for all of the credibility that he was able to bring to Irish nationalism. Young Ireland regrouped just enough from losing O'Connell's leadership to stage, in 1848, a tiny insurrection — “the battle of Widow McCormack's cabbage plot” — that was over as soon as it started.¹⁵⁹ Ward notes, “The Nation had consistently praised the warrior heroes of ancient Ireland and the men of 1798 and 1803, but it appears that the young Irishmen were not, by instinct or aptitude, revolutionaries themselves.”¹⁶⁰ Many of Young Ireland's guiding figures scattered worldwide after this failure, but their daring later inspired the Easter Risers in planning their own insurrection.¹⁶¹

The Great Hunger was finally relieved by normal food circulation in 1851, but less than 75% of the pre-famine population was left in Ireland. The Irish blamed England.¹⁶² Their beloved Catholic faith enjoyed an even more entrenched position in their lives because of this, as described by Terence Brown:

Crucial to the institutional and popular achievements of the church in the period following the Famine until very recent times was the role played by Catholicism in confirming a sense of national identity. The church ... offered to most Irishmen and women in the period a way to be Irish which set them apart from the rest of the inhabitants of the British Isles, meeting the needs thereby of a nascent Irish nationalism at a time when the Irish language and the Gaelic culture of the past were enduring a protracted decline. ... [P]ermeated with that profound sense of the supernatural which had characterized the countryside for centuries, Catholicism was richly endowed with attributes appropriate to its modern

156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

158 Ward 38, Evans Lecture 4

159 Ward 51, 58

160 Ibid. 58

161 Ibid. 51, 58

162 Ibid. 39

role in the nation's life. ... Irish Catholicism increasingly became a badge of national identity at a time when the church also ... enshrined the rights of private property. In a nation where nationalist aspiration was so often rooted in the farmer's rigorous attachment to his land, all this was to help ensure the church's continued role in Irish life ...¹⁶³

While piety was at a high, local customs were suffering. Sir William Wilde recorded a noticeable decline in rural observances of folk tradition in 1853 and attributed this to the recent depredations of "starvation and pestilence."¹⁶⁴

In 1858, James Stephens began the famed Irish Republican Brotherhood, popularly named the Fenians after the historical kings' elite soldiers. John O'Mahony founded the equivalent Fenian Brotherhood in America.¹⁶⁵ This new generation of activists saw themselves as the modern heirs of the justice-loving Fianna.¹⁶⁶ The American and Irish Fenian branches attempted a rebellion in 1865, but Britain arrested most of the leaders. James Stephens managed to escape and take temporary shelter in America.¹⁶⁷ Michael Davitt, who would become famous in the later land struggles, joined the IRB in this year, where his gunrunning activities earned him a seven-year imprisonment.¹⁶⁸ Amid this conflict was born a future poet and political activist whose career would grow amidst its snowballing aftermath — William Butler Yeats.¹⁶⁹

The Fenians tried one more rebellion, also a failure, in 1867, but the British government declined to execute suspects because they "did not want to create Fenian martyrs."¹⁷⁰ One of the young Yeats's first memories was connected to this episode: someone told a joke about a Fenian bomb threat, which only terrified him.¹⁷¹ This early exposure to his homeland's instability may have formed part of his motivation in adulthood to advocate peaceful revolution through the culture rather than forcible political upheaval. America's Fenian Brotherhood was floundering due to its anti-Anglo stance, so its leadership replaced it with the Clan na Gael, which emphasized pro-Irishness over anger with Britain.¹⁷² Activist violence stayed at a minimum for

163 Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present*, 25

164 Brown 34

165 Ward 52

166 Pethica 180 (n. 9)

167 Ward 53

168 Evans Lecture 6

169 Pethica 489

170 Ward 53

171 Pethica 210

172 Ward 54

several decades after this, as the Fenian network assessed Ireland's climate and watched the development of new political ventures toward Irish self-determination.¹⁷³

The first of these was Isaac Butt's Home Government Association, organized in 1870, to push for a subordinate (rather than separate) Irish Parliament in Dublin, as had existed before the Act of Union.¹⁷⁴ In 1873, the HGA renamed itself the Home Rule League and adopted the support strategies of O'Connell's fondly remembered Associations.¹⁷⁵ The Irish Parliamentary Party founded by Butt was recognized in London in 1874, with 59 MPs as members.¹⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the two groups called "Fenian" officially combined under "a single revolutionary directory with seven members,"¹⁷⁷ still keeping a low profile.

Yeats's little brother died in 1873, causing his older relatives to mention how they had heard the banshee following their family; the concept frightened him. Christianity and native myth were equally unappealing to him at this point in his life, and he turned to poetry as the savior of his imagination.¹⁷⁸ He was also coming to understand his awkward position between two antipathetic nations. Being Irish by birth, he did not feel like a native Briton the way his hiking companions from school seemed to feel it when they said the names of places; yet because of his partly British upbringing and well-to-do Protestant family, he wasn't seen as fully Irish either.¹⁷⁹

Poor crop yields between 1877 and 1879 reawakened the pre-famine land struggles of poor Irish tenant farmers against their British landlords,¹⁸⁰ leading to the outbreak of the Land War.¹⁸¹ Isaac Butt died in 1879, the same year as the unrest accelerated, but Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt were quick to draw from his support base with their National Land League.¹⁸² Davitt already had a history of fighting for Irish rights via the IRB, while Parnell, though very British in speech and education (and a landlord himself), was keenly interested in Irish tenant ownership of land.¹⁸³ While Parnell arranged the people's energy and the League's

173 Ibid.

174 Ibid. 39

175 Ibid.

176 Ward 40

177 Ibid. 52

178 Pethica 211-13

179 Ibid. 214-15

180 Ward 40-41

181 Evans Lecture 7

182 Ward 40-41

183 Evans Lecture 6

strategies into a cohesive movement, Davitt went to raise support among American Fenians.¹⁸⁴ The Land League denounced violence, knowing that the escalating murder of landlords would deeply hurt the cause. Many of these more violent Land Leaguers were former Fenians or Irish Republicans. Parnell maintained the political alacrity to stay clear of their intrigues, recommending ostracism rather than bloodshed to deal with those who took an evicted family's land.¹⁸⁵ Ward elaborates,

The Land League ... demanded legislation to guarantee fair rents, security of tenure and the right of a tenant to sell his tenancy for the value of the improvements he had made. But it also organized boycotts ... directed against exploiting landlords and farmers who took over the farms of evicted tenants. It followed the policy ... that civil disobedience and the nonpayment of rents would destroy landlordism.¹⁸⁶

In 1880, Parnell took up the mantle of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Home Rule League, fully inheriting Isaac Butt's legacy, and added land reform to these groups' priorities.¹⁸⁷ William Gladstone took the prime minister's seat the same year, giving Parnell someone he felt he could work with based on Gladstone's previous pro-Irish reforms.¹⁸⁸ Sure enough, Gladstone proposed a Land Act in 1881, but it failed to address the unfair debts owed by many farmers. The Land League was banned and Parnell imprisoned for conducting a "campaign of intimidation."¹⁸⁹ Obviously, the prime minister would only work with Ireland on his own terms. While in jail, Parnell learned that a Land League attempt to end all rent payments until tenant farmers' grievances were addressed had failed, but he was held innocent of all land-related violence.¹⁹⁰ His sister, Anna Parnell, led the founding of the short-lived Ladies Land League to continue the fight while the men's League was not operational.¹⁹¹

Parnell was released in 1882 on the promise that he would support Gladstone's Land Act and ally the IPP with his ministry; Gladstone in return "agreed to amend [the bill] to pay arrears of [farmers'] rent."¹⁹² The Land League and Home Rule League fused into the Irish National

184 Ibid.

185 Evans Lecture 6

186 Ward 41

187 Ibid. 40-41

188 Ibid. 41-42

189 Ibid. 42

190 Evans Lecture 6

191 Maura Cronin, "Ireland: Politics and Administration, 1870-1914," Multitext

192 Ward 42

League, which became Ireland's major nationalist network for those seeking to effect change politically.¹⁹³ Through the efforts of Parnell's supporters and the Land Act, a native Catholic middle class was created.¹⁹⁴

Terence Brown offers an overview of the shift in contemporary Irish literature that occurred around this time.

The new literature that began to be produced in the eighties and nineties of the last century primarily affirmed the heroic traditions of the Irish people, directing their attention to the mythological tales of their past, to the heroes and noble deeds of a vanished age. When such literary antiquarianism had managed to suggest a continuity of experience between past and present, a powerful propagandist weapon had been forged ... that suggested that the heroic could again dominate the Irish world. The heroic ideal, as presented in Yeats's poems and plays, in Standish O'Grady's versions of the mythological literature, in the translations of Lady Gregory, and in the many poems by minor poets of the Celtic Movement, entered the consciousness of twentieth-century Ireland as a metaphor of political hope.¹⁹⁵

This heroic motif was very useful to nationalists in a number of different incarnations.

One very practical way to further stimulate the nationalist consciousness of the rural Irish was through sport. In 1884, Michael Cusack launched the Gaelic Athletic Association, which “promoted Irish games such as Gaelic football and hurling and forbade its members to play English games such as soccer or cricket. It became extremely influential in rural Ireland.”¹⁹⁶ “It further discouraged ‘foreign’ sports by barring Protestants and members of the British military establishment. The GAA was strongly supported by the Catholic clergy and by Irish nationalists of all shades ...”¹⁹⁷ Cúchulainn's fabled skill at hurling was a distinct tie to the mythological past of this cultural rallying point, helping explain their devotion to the GAA despite British opposition. Michael Davitt praised its power to draw the Irish together, as opponents of the nation's forced union with Great Britain used the gatherings as a way to show their defiance of British rule. However, because Cusack's irascible behavior managed to alienate most of his powerful allies, the GAA never reached its revolutionary potential (beyond the networking

193 Ibid. 41

194 Evans Lecture 7

195 Brown 63

196 Ward 58

197 Myrtle Hill, “Ireland: Religion and Culture, 1870-1914,” Multitext

opportunities it provided). Crowds of members later joined the IRB.¹⁹⁸

Meanwhile, in urban Ireland, Yeats was maturing in his craft and widening his literary acquaintance. He met John O'Leary, a former Fenian exile, in 1885 and learned from him of Thomas Davis's nationalist work; Standish O'Grady's folklore also came to his attention.¹⁹⁹ Douglas Hyde also entered O'Leary's circle of young pro-Irish writers.²⁰⁰ This year was the height of Parnell and the IPP's power.²⁰¹ The newly passed Land Purchase Act removed further barriers between tenant farmers and ownership of the land on which they lived.²⁰² Gladstone felt the moment might be right to introduce a Home Rule bill. His first try, in 1886, did not pass the House of Commons, but it attracted much attention.²⁰³

Yeats made a major contribution to the trend of mythical literature with his long narrative poem, *The Wanderings of Oisín*, in 1889.²⁰⁴ In it he combines the myths surrounding Fionn mac Cúmhail's adopted son Oisín, the later Christian modification which has Oisín meet St. Patrick, and Yeats's own antipathy toward Irish Christianity. His Oisín literally rides out of the ancient stories into Christian Ireland after 300 enchanted years in the company of his Sidhe wife, Niamh, and he hates what he sees, pronouncing the new order weak and low. He thinks that Patrick and Christianity have destroyed the old robust culture, a later theme in Yeats's short stories.²⁰⁵

Patrick opens the poem with abrasive condemnations of Oisín's paganism, while Oisín (clearly the sympathetic character) makes his reply by mourning times forever lost:

Sad to remember, sick with years,
The swift innumerable spears,
The horsemen with their floating hair,
And bowls of barley, honey, and wine,
Those merry couples dancing in tune,
And the white body that lay by mine;
But the tale, though words be lighter than air,
Must live to be old like the wandering moon. (Book I, ll. 4-11)²⁰⁶

He persists in telling his story despite Patrick's persistent interjections — “You are still wrecked

198 Evans Lecture 8

199 Pethica 301-02

200 Hyde xvi-xvii

201 Ward 40-44

202 Evans Lecture 6

203 Ward 43, 76

204 Pethica 489

205 Richard Finneran, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems, a New Edition*, 382-85

206 Ibid. 355

among heathen dreams” (Book I, l. 30)²⁰⁷ and “Boast not, nor mourn with drooping head / Companions long accursed and dead, / And hounds for centuries dust and air” (Book I, ll. 127-29).²⁰⁸ This Patrick is by no means the firm yet gentle missionary reported in history. He constantly berates Oisín for criticizing the Church and answers his inquiries about the fate of his old Fenian friends with graphic descriptions of the damnation and torment their heathen religion had earned them.²⁰⁹ Though composed of some very good mythology told in riveting verse, the back-and-forth between the missionary and the Fenian goes on like this, making Yeats's negative personal position on the Church and its influence unmistakable. This is a point of contention that some Catholics had with Yeats, even when his authorial skill and his love for Ireland were clearly visible in his work: he treated mythical gods reverently and spoke wistfully of the druidic age. Already set apart by his Anglo-Irish ancestry and Protestant connections, this was another alienating factor between him and the independence movement he espoused.

Specific to the 1880s nostalgia for Ireland's roots is a scene in which the Tuatha de Danaan, among whom Oisín has been living, ask him to sing a song. In true Celtic hyperbole, the highest human joy that Oisín can sing is the saddest thing the Danaan have ever heard. This shows how every age idealized its past—the third-century Fenians idealized the Danaan legends in the way that Yeats (in Oisín's voice) now idolizes Fenian life before Christianity came.²¹⁰ And like Yeats, Oisín refuses to give up hope for Ireland's future and proclaims, “... I hear amid the thunder / The Fenian horses; armour torn asunder; / Laughter and cries ...” (Book II, ll. 209-11).²¹¹ This prophecy looks forward to the Easter Risers, who felt that they were following in their ancestors' footsteps by reclaiming Ireland from foreign subjugation and restoring its wilder past.

1890 was a rough year for Irish nationalists. Parnell fell from power over the scandal of his affair with the married Katherine O'Shea, splitting the IPP and losing Church support for nationalism.²¹² Though the arrangement was previously no secret (Katherine's husband wanted to stay on Parnell's good side so as to have a better shot at retaining political office), Captain O'Shea ended up needing money that he believed would only come to him if he divorced his wife

207 Ibid. 356

208 Ibid. 358

209 Ibid. 372-73, 385, 386

210 Ibid. 361

211 Ibid. 373

212 Ward 44

and retained her property. Thus, he initiated a lawsuit that excited as much outrage as if the country were hearing of the affair for the first time.²¹³ Parnell died the following year.²¹⁴

Come gather round me Parnellites
And praise our chosen man,
Stand upright on your legs awhile,
Stand upright while you can,
For soon we lie where he is laid
And he is underground;
Come fill up all those glasses
And pass the bottle round.

And here's a cogent reason
And I have many more,
He fought the might of England
And saved the Irish poor,
Whatever good a farmer's got
He brought it all to pass;
And here's another reason,
That Parnell loved a lass.

And here's a final reason,
He was of such a kind
Every man that sings a song
Keeps Parnell in his mind
For Parnell was a proud man,
No prouder trod the ground,
And a proud man's a lovely man
So pass the bottle round.

The Bishops and the Party
That tragic story made,
A husband that had sold his wife
And after that betrayed;
But stories that live longest
Are sung above the glass,
And Parnell loved his country
And Parnell loved his lass.

— “Come Gather Round Me Parnellites,” Yeats, writ. 1937 / pub. 1938²¹⁵

Yeats was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival of the 1890s, which “differed from the Gaelic movement in believing that the literary medium could be English.”²¹⁶ (Participating

213 Connolly, “O’Shea, Capt. William,” 440

214 Ward 44

215 Pethica 118

216 Ward 59

writers were “predominantly Protestant and from the upper class.”²¹⁷ He saw two strains of literary art developing in Ireland: English and French aestheticism (concerned with a text's aural beauty) and Irish Nationalism (good at plain speech but bad at poetry); his hope was to marry the two and elevate Irish literature to a self-assertive art form.²¹⁸ The National Literary Society was founded in Dublin in 1892 as part of the Literary Revival,²¹⁹ where Yeats's privileged education came into conflict with the more virulent nationalism of O'Leary and Charles Gavan Duffy. He wanted to educate the rural Irish through the Society's “New Irish Library” project, to get them ready to think their own thoughts and lead their own nation, while the Nationalists were more interested in propagandizing the rabble and whipping them into a revolutionary mob. When he opposed them on intellectual grounds, they damaged his credibility as a Nationalist.²²⁰ “The ‘Young Ireland’ patriotic movement of the 1840s had aimed to promote Irish Nationalism via Irish literature, and in Yeats' view had consequently made the mistake of judging literature by its political orthodoxy rather than by its creative and intellectual merit.”²²¹

Hyde and Yeats also met in person for the first time during this year.²²² Though Yeats had called Hyde “the best of all Irish folklorists” in 1889²²³ and respected him immensely as a scholar, they disagreed on the primacy that the Irish language deserved. Hyde felt that spoken and written Irish must be a component of their cultural renaissance, but Yeats saw this as a futile attempt to return to the past. He was loth to abandon English, for to attempt to return a whole nation to its old language and everyday life would not be relevant to the people of his own day.²²⁴ As he wrote to the editor of *United Ireland* in his essay “The De-Anglicising of Ireland,” “When we remember the majesty of Cuchullin and the beauty of sorrowing Deirdre we should not forget that it is that majesty and that beauty which are immortal, and not the perishing tongue [Gaelic] that first told of them.”²²⁵

With Ireland still reeling from the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell, in 1893 Hyde helped

217 Ibid.

218 Pethica 258-60

219 Ward 59

220 Pethica 222-23

221 Ibid. 279 (n. 2)

222 Evans Lecture 8

223 Hyde xvi-xvii

224 Pethica 261-62, 269-71

225 Ibid. 262

Eoin MacNeill found the Gaelic League,²²⁶ which he called in the introduction to his *Literary History* “the only body in Ireland which appears to realize that Ireland has a past, has a history, has a literature, and the only body in Ireland which seeks to render the present a rational continuation of the past.”²²⁷ He had grown up in County Roscommon, learning Irish from the people,²²⁸ and saw the reinstitution of Gaelic as essential to the revival of native Irish self-awareness. He emphatically classified the English writings of Irishmen with *English* literature — only that written in Irish deserved to be called Irish literature.²²⁹ What Hyde and his associates seemed to overlook, explained Terence Brown, was that Gaelic was not the one true guardian of all things Irish that they believed it to be. Ireland had developed a very unique, native, and authentic life in English, and though English may not have been spoken there as long as Irish had, it was there to stay and must be engaged with if would-be cultural revivalists were to acknowledge the whole of their own culture, as Yeats maintained.²³⁰

Though the Gaelic League was “founded .. to propagate knowledge of and interest in the [Irish] language,”²³¹ it ended up attracting quite a few politically-oriented minds as well. League members included later Easter Rising directors Patrick Pearse and Eamon de Valera.²³² Brian Ó Cuív's introduction to Hyde's *Literary History* avers,

There were other national movements alongside it, some cultural, some economic, some industrial, but the League proved to be the most dynamic of them all, and from it derived much of the inspiration which filled the handful of men who marched out in Easter week of 1916 to challenge the might of an empire. Hyde was not one of these men, nor need we believe that his sympathies were with them. Yet there might well have been no '1916' but for him.²³³

However much of a pipe dream it was to hope that Irish would once again dominate the nation's everyday speech, what the Gaelic League got right was “a concerned awareness of the psychological distress suffered by countless individual Irishmen and women because of colonial

226 Hill, “Religion and Culture,” Multitext; Hyde xi

227 Hyde vii

228 Ibid. xiii-xiv

229 Ibid. xxxiii

230 Brown 44-45

231 Ibid. 39

232 Ward 58-59

233 Hyde xi-xii

oppression.”²³⁴ When using their own ancestral tongue, the people could feel like they truly belonged to the land.

Home Rule also made another effort in 1893, with the Second Home Rule Bill passing the House of Commons this time but still falling short in Lords.²³⁵ Protestant Unionists (mainly headquartered in Ulster, but with sympathizers throughout the country) realized that they needed a contingency plan if Home Rule was actually starting to stand a chance of becoming reality. In 1895, Yeats published his poem “To Ireland in the Coming Times” (written in 1892), letting his compatriots know that he was still as passionate as ever to see an independent Ireland, even if he didn't seem on board with all of their methods.

*Know, that I would accounted be
True brother of that company,
Who sang to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
Ballad and story, rann and song;
Nor be I any less of them,
Because the red-rose-bordered hem
Of her, whose history began
Before God made the angelic clan,
Trails all about the written page;
For in the world's first blossoming age
The light fall of her flying feet
Made Ireland's heart begin to beat;
And still the starry candles flare
To help her light foot here and there;
And still the thoughts of Ireland brood
Upon her holy quietude.*

(“her” refers to Ireland as a spiritual entity)

*Nor may I less be counted one
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,
Because to him, who ponders well,
My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
Of the dim wisdoms old and deep,
That God gives unto man in sleep.
For the elemental beings go
About my table to and fro.
In flood and fire and clay and wind,
They huddle from man's pondering mind;
Yet he who treads in austere ways
May surely meet their ancient gaze.
Man ever journeys on with them
After the red-rose-bordered hem.
Ah, faeries, dancing under the moon,*

234 Brown 46

235 Ward 76

A Druid land, a Druid tune!

*While still I may, I write for you
The love I lived, the dream I knew.
From our birthday, until we die,
Is but the winking of an eye;
And we, our singing and our love,
The mariners of night above,
And all the wizard things that go
About my table to and fro,
Are passing on to where may be,
In truth's consuming ecstasy,
No place for love and dream at all;
For God goes by with white foot-fall.
I cast my heart into my rhymes,
That you, in the dim coming times,
May know how my heart went with them
After the red-rose-bordered hem.²³⁶*

In the summer of 1896, Yeats vacationed on the Aran Islands, appreciating their sanctuary-like, traditional Irish atmosphere and consequently regarding them as a retreat that could cure anyone of “morbidity and melancholy.”²³⁷ He also accompanied his friend Lady Gregory on her folklore-collecting expeditions in the countryside surrounding her estate, Coole Park, during one of his many stays there.²³⁸ He said of the uniqueness of Irish myth,

Our mythology, our legends, differ from those of other European countries because down to the end of the seventeenth century they had the attention, perhaps the unquestioned belief, of peasant and noble alike; Homer belongs to sedentary men, even to-day our ancient our mediaeval soldiers and lovers, can make a pedlar shudder.²

Lady Gregory later compiled the tales she heard into her own anthology of ancient Irish myths.

Ever since meeting Maud Gonne in 1889,²⁴⁰ Yeats had been drawn into her radical-leaning nationalists, though he continued to oppose violence. He persuaded her against the Victorian Empire in a rally orchestrated by labor activist James Connolly. When a riot broke out in response to the program, he would not let her try to calm the crowd for fear of her getting hurt.²⁴¹ In this way, perhaps, he unwittingly contributed to the style of wild,

236 Pethica 21-22

237 Ibid. 243

238 Ibid. 245, 247

239 Ibid. 305

240 Ibid. 489

241 Ibid. 233-34

violent revolution that he had been hoping to change with his writings into a more lofty, peaceful one. He wanted Ireland's rebirth to be spiritual in nature, a return to the mystical traditions connected intimately with the land, and to spread among the young. His vision of the future Irish nation was very idealistic and romantic, and depended on the people's shared mythology.²⁴² Apart from the fiasco at the rally, this was a productive year for his writing. Two stories in particular, "The Crucifixion of the Outcast" and "The Old Men of the Twilight," show where he stood at this stage of the independence movement. In the first story he paints Christianity as a foreign invasion from Europe that has killed the Irish people's joy in their native stories and songs, twisting their minds to see demonic sorcery in the lore rather than heartfelt wonder.²⁴³ The second features an indigenous poet cursed to avian form by St. Patrick and later shot down by a suspicious watchman.²⁴⁴ The bardic figure in both meets a tragic end, symbolic of the decline in respect for the folk poet's vocation and possibly signifying Yeats's perception of his own standing in the public eye. Despite his best efforts to distance himself from the Protestant Unionists with whom his birth connected him, it was always harder for him than he expected to prove to the Nationalists that he was their ally. With Nationalist and Unionist Ireland at such odds, he felt properly part of neither.²⁴⁵

The next year, Yeats and Gonne met James Stephens and helped organize the centennial celebration of Wolfe Tone's failed Rising, which stirred some old nationalist flames.²⁴⁶ Former IPP members also came out of the shadows to band together as the United Irish League.²⁴⁷ Arthur Griffith founded the *United Irishman* newspaper in 1899 to advocate a passive-resistance strategy for obtaining home rule,²⁴⁸ and Douglas Hyde published his landmark *Literary History of Ireland*.²⁴⁹ For this work, he had collected orature from "Roscommon, Leitrim, Galway, and Donegal," not far from Yeats and Gregory's gleanings fields.²⁵⁰

The prevailing opinion among the British and Anglo-Irish intelligentsia during Hyde's lifetime was that Ireland had no culture worth speaking of before the English came; "they were

242 Ibid. 234, 247

243 Ibid. 192-97

244 Ibid. 197-200

245 Ibid. 224

246 Ibid. 238, 133 (n. 2)

247 Ward 44

248 Ibid. 54-55

249 Connolly, "Hyde, Douglas," 265

250 Hyde xvii

newspaper.²⁵⁸ The play that provoked a stir with its marriage of martial rhetoric and gripping mythological images, Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, was first performed shortly afterward, in 1902. He worried that it too closely recalled the 1798 rebellion, and that the later violent insurrections could thereby be imputed to him, when he had intended no bloodshed to arise from his work.²⁵⁹ While the revolutionaries were invigorated by Yeats's new work, they were less satisfied with the placid trajectory of the land movement under the non-impetuous John Redmond.²⁶⁰ Though he won more land purchase rights for farmers, as with the Land Act of 1903,²⁶¹ he was not an inspiring leader for young idealists who wanted battle.

Lady Gregory entered more of the nationalist spotlight in 1904, co-founding the Abbey Theatre with Yeats²⁶² and publishing her mythology collection, *Gods and Fighting Men*.²⁶³ Yeats proposed that native Irishness could bring the modern theater into the Literary Revival with the kind of “sincere drama” that popular productions lacked, while simultaneously reawakening (without didacticism) the unifying love that all Irishmen bore for their nation.²⁶⁴ He was greatly indebted to Lady Gregory for her patronage of the Irish arts.²⁶⁵

The addition of *Gods and Fighting Men* to the mythological canon marked her, like Yeats, as a member of the Protestant ascendancy who wanted to see Ireland in its people's hands. She concurred with Yeats's mind exactly when she said of her translations of the Irish epics, “We work to add dignity to Ireland.”²⁶⁶ She may have been an ascendancy heiress, and thus not as rooted in the land for centuries as the small farmers of Sligo; but her background in great poetic cycles served her well in modernizing the marginalized and dismissively treated “ancient Irish literature.”²⁶⁷ In his introduction to the work, Yeats wrote, “... men who live primitive lives where instinct does the work of reason are fully conscious of many things that we cannot perceive at all. As life becomes more orderly, more deliberate, the supernatural world sinks

258 Ward 54-55

259 Pethica 133 (n. 2)

260 Ward 46

261 Ibid. 46, 84

262 Ibid. 59

263 Lady Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha de Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland*, title page

264 Pethica 268, 277

265 Ibid. 246-47

266 Ibid. 249

267 Ibid.

farther away.”²⁶⁸ His hopes for the book's effect on the growing insurgency are more evident later: “When Oisín is speaking with S. Patrick of the friends and the life he has outlived, he can but cry out constantly against a religion that has no meaning for him. He laments, and the country-people have remembered his words for centuries: ‘I will cry my fill, but not for God, but because Finn and the Fianna are not living.’”²⁶⁹

Gaelic-speaking Ireland ... has always had a popular literature. One cannot say how much that literature has done for the vigor of the race, for one cannot count the hands its praise of kings and high-hearted queens has made hot upon the sword-hilt, or the amorous eyes it made lustful for strength and beauty. One remembers indeed that when the farming people and the labourers of the towns made their last attempt to cast out England by force of arms they named themselves after the companions of Finn. ... Surely these old stories, whether of Finn or Cuchulain, helped to sing the old Irish and the old Norman-Irish aristocracy to their end. They heard their hereditary poets and story-tellers, and they took to horse and died fighting against Elizabeth or against Cromwell ...²⁷⁰

Yeats hoped that by setting down in English print some of the most prominent stories, Lady Gregory would make them familiar to a new generation that did not know enough Irish to hear them traditionally, and would therefore help preserve the national mythological memory.²⁷¹

More of Yeats's work, concurrent with Lady Gregory's volume, included the eerie short story “The Death of Hanrahan,” the itinerant bard persona whom Yeats made the central character of a whole collection. The death scene demonstrates Yeats' belief that true Irish bards (like himself) were closer to the world of spirits than the world of the living, explaining why they are not completely understood by men.²⁷² The Sword, Stone, Spear, and Cauldron which Hanrahan references in his dying delirium were “the four talismans of the Tuatha de Danaan” and figured largely in Yeats and Maud Gonne's psychic rituals. He seemed almost to entertain the idea of helping the people (re)discover the religion of Ireland herself as a kind of deity, that would unify her people into a nation more deeply than political agitation could.²⁷³

The political agitation was entering a rapid growth stage, however. Griffith's *Cumann na*

268 Gregory xii

269 Ibid. xix

270 Ibid. xxi-xxii

271 Ibid. xxiii-xxiv

272 Pethica 205-09

273 Ibid. 235, 239

nGaedheal merged with the Dungannon Clubs (an IRB spawn group) to form Sinn Féin, styling itself the people's party.²⁷⁴ On the opposing front, the Ulster Unionist Council was founded.²⁷⁵ The Clan na Gael sent Tom Clarke, part of their 1880s bombing campaign, to Ireland in 1907 to rejuvenate the IRB.²⁷⁶ The next three years were the height of Sinn Féin's political influence, making it "a front for revolutionary separatism."²⁷⁷ During this time, the Gaelic League surpassed "more than six hundred branches and many thousands of dedicated supporters" in 1908,²⁷⁸ concurrent with Patrick Pearse's founding of St. Edna's bilingual school in Dublin. It "stressed Irish language, history, culture and games,"²⁷⁹ and he encouraged his young pupils to love Ireland so much that they would be part of a blood sacrifice for it if necessary.²⁸⁰

Patrick Pearse was, in the context of the Easter Rising, the most distinguished product of the Gaelic revival. ... Pearse believed that the educational system imposed on Ireland by England had crushed the Irish national spirit. Liberation could only be achieved by the overthrow of English education and ultimately by the overthrow of English imperialism ... Pearse was obsessed by the heroic deed and the heroic image. Fenians might hope to overthrow England by an armed rising, but Pearse had a mystical and sacrificial vision. Ireland could only be reborn through the blood sacrifice of a few. Bloodshed, he argued, 'is a cleansing thing and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood.'

Not only was Pearse inspired by his national myths and legends, he conflated them with Christological images of sacrificial redemption. It was extremism like this, combined with the rapid resurfacing of revolutionary fever on a national scale, that made Yeats fear that many of the men coming to power were not ready. They had not had enough cultural education to create or maintain a level-headed social administration in Ireland; all they knew were speeches and frenzy.²⁸¹ Despite his attempts to dissociate himself from the image of the "outsider nobles," Yeats's emerging theme is that he and others with aristocratic backgrounds (like Lady Gregory) were meant to be the discoverers and guardians of Irish heritage, leading the common people to see what they had always possessed but never known the potential of. Working men who shot

274 Ward 55

275 Ibid. 87

276 Ibid. 54

277 Ibid. 55

278 Ibid. 59

279 Ibid. 61

280 Evans Lecture 11

281 Pethica 252-53

straight to power, he argued, did not have the training and clear-headedness necessary to wield their authority. From his journal: "Every day I notice some new analogy between [the] long-established life of the well-born and the artist's life. We come from the permanent things and create them, and instead of old blood we have old emotions and we carry in our head that form of society which aristocracies create now and again for some brief moment at Urbino or Versailles. We too despise the mob and suffer at its hands ..."²⁸²

In 1910, the IRB started the *Irish Freedom* newspaper,²⁸³ and "every student at the National University of Ireland was required to matriculate in Irish."²⁸⁴ In the face of such Gaelic enthusiasm, the Literary Revival petered out because of its close association with Anglo culture. On the political front, the Parliament Act of 1911 restricted the House of Lords' power over bills from a veto to a two-year delay, overridable by three successive passages in the House of Commons.²⁸⁵ Unionists saw the opportunity for Home Rule to slip in this way and initiated talk of establishing a separate provisional government for Ulster if such a bill did pass.²⁸⁶ The 1912 Ulster Covenant gained 500,000 signatures "[pledging] to oppose Home Rule by force."²⁸⁷ When the Third Home Rule Bill passed the House of Commons and received the expected shelving by the Lords, "Ulster Protestants organized a paramilitary force, the Ulster Volunteers, to resist home rule ..."²⁸⁸ The IRB mustered the Irish National Volunteers as a counter-force later in 1913.²⁸⁹ Pearse joined the IRB and became their "director of military organization."²⁹⁰ British Prime Minister Asquith secretly sounded out both Unionists and Nationalists on the possibility of a temporary partition so the Dublin Parliament could develop a workable form of Home Rule before Ulster was required to participate, and the Unionists narrowed down their list of loyal counties to the six of Northern Ireland today, in case they were given a chance to accept Asquith's offer.²⁹¹ The much-debated bill passed its first of the three required votes back in the House of Commons.²⁹²

282 Ibid. 251

283 Ward 55

284 Ibid. 59

285 Ibid. 76

286 Ibid. 87

287 Ibid.

288 Ibid. 55, 76, 87

289 Ibid. 55-56, 88

290 Ibid. 61

291 Ibid. 89-90

292 Ibid. 76

In April 1914, the Ulster Volunteers armed themselves with roughly 20,000 German rifles.²⁹³ The Home Rule Bill had gotten the second passage it needed;²⁹⁴ John Redmond assured Britain of IPP allegiance in the impending war.²⁹⁵ In September, Ulster Unionists forestalled the third Commons passage of the Home Rule Bill by threatening civil war in Ireland if it became law.²⁹⁶ There was no talk of partition at the moment, but the whole issue had to be put aside nonetheless when Britain entered World War I in September.²⁹⁷ The war effort took many possible combatants out of the reach of a domestic conflict and polarized those who stayed behind. The IRB's Irish National Volunteers divided into the 12,000-man Irish Volunteers, who said "only a self-governing Ireland should participate in the war," and the 160,000-man National Volunteers who were willing to fight for Britain.²⁹⁸ Both the Ulster Volunteers and the National Volunteers lost men to the British army, but the Irish Volunteers gained nearly 4,000 war dissenters.²⁹⁹ The proliferation of antiwar movements in Ireland counteracted British recruiting quite a bit; the rhetoric was that "Irishmen ... should not fight for the freedom of others until Ireland itself was free."³⁰⁰ Worried about the subversive effect of the growing Irish Volunteers on IPP influence, he had several of his Party members put on their governing committee — "[b]ut what he and the chairman of the Volunteers, [Eoin] MacNeill, did not know was that the key positions in the command structure were held by members of the I.R.B., men such as Patrick Pearse, Sean MacDiarmada, The O'Rahilly, and Bulmer Hobson. It was they who led a small number of the Volunteers into the Easter Rising in 1916."³⁰¹ The Irish Volunteers, like their Ulster rivals, also managed to get their hands on about 1,500 German guns before the year was out. Yeats, seeing to what heights of delusion the beholders of his mythical vision had stretched it, wrote "A Coat," published in 1916.

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;

293 Ibid. 87

294 Ibid. 76

295 Ibid. 92, 95

296 Ibid. 63, 75-76

297 Ibid. 92

298 Ibid. 97

299 Ibid.

300 Ibid. 3-4

301 Ibid. 56

countrymen.

That May, 1915, the IRB created the Military Committee, “later renamed Military Council,” to unite itself with the Irish Volunteers and Sinn Féin.³⁰⁷ MacDiarmada, Tom Clarke, Pearse, Joseph Plunkett, Thomas MacDonagh, and Eamon Ceannt, the members, began meeting to discuss secret plans for a new rising; “... the sketchy nature of their planning suggests that most were driven less by a real hope of victory than by the idea of reviving nationalist militancy through a bold gesture.”³⁰⁸ By December, they had selected the date as Easter Sunday 1916.³⁰⁹ They kept MacNeill so thoroughly ignorant about the plans that he only found out about the Rising a week before its appointed time.³¹⁰ The nationalists in government, whose stated goal was to achieve peacefully the freedoms for which the revolutionaries were willing to kill, remained curiously silent in the administration of the British coalition government. Their reticence allowed the vocal Unionists to gain leverage.³¹¹

The coming of the new year brought military conscription to the British Empire, but Ireland was still exempt.³¹² Rising plans now needed to move ahead fully if everything was to be in place on time. Clan na Gael's John Devoy ordered his prescribed amount of German matériel for the IRB in February, but Sir Roger Casement, an Irish diplomat privy to the plotting, was skeptical. He believed that Germany had no interest in the Rising's success and was only helping them in order to keep Britain distracted.³¹³ He took passage on a German submarine in April to try to get the Risers to cease operations, believing that they were doomed to fail. He was arrested at sea by the British.

O what has made that sudden noise?
 What on the threshold stands?
 It never crossed the sea because
 John Bull and the sea are friends;
 But this is not the old sea
 Nor this the old seashore.
 What gave that roar of mockery,
 That roar in the sea's roar?
The ghost of Roger Casement

307 Ward 101

308 Connolly, “rising of 1916,” 514

309 Ward 101

310 Ibid. 104-05

311 Ibid. 97-98

312 Ward 3-4

313 Ibid. 101-02

But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eye
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.³⁰²

The oratory espoused by Pearse during 1915 partly explains Yeats's attitude. "... Pearse insisted, 'Ireland will not find Christ's peace until she has taken Christ's sword.'"³⁰³

At the Dublin funeral of the old Fenian, O'Donovan Rossa ... Pearse declared, "Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations." He did not expect to defeat the English in battle. Indeed, victory would come, as it came for Christ, from not surviving, from the sacrifice and the example. As McDara says in Pearse's play, *The Singer*, "One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world." In Pearse, then, was combined the heroic sacrifice of Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet, the cultural and spiritual vision of Thomas Davis and the Gaelic League, the messianic image of Christ, and the revolutionary zeal of the Fenians. It proved to be an extraordinarily volatile mixture.³⁰⁴

James Pethica explains,

Padraic Pearse (1879-1916), executed for his part in the Irish Rising of 1916, had been inspired by the legendary Irish epic stories of Cuchulain, the hero of the Red Branch ("Fenian") warriors, and he had called for blood sacrifice as necessary for Ireland's renewal. The Rising was timed for Easter Monday 1916 to evoke Christ's death and resurrection, celebrated in the Christian Mass.³⁰⁵

Terence Brown tries to unveil the idealized version of self-government of which Pearse and his cronies had convinced themselves; a new nation in which "[a] free Ireland would embark upon a radically adventurous program to restore the ancient language, to discover the vitality residual in a nation devastated by a colonial power, and would flower with new social and cultural forms, testaments to the as yet unrecognized genius of the Gael."³⁰⁶ They did not expect to live to see it, but this was part of the legacy that they imagined they were bequeathing on their oppressed

302 Pethica 52

303 Ward 103

304 Ibid. 61-62

305 Pethica 305 (n. 3)

306 Brown 13

Is beating on the door.

John Bull has stood for Parliament,
A dog must have his day,
The country thinks no end of him
For he knows how to say
At a beanfeast or a banquet,
That all must hang their trust
Upon the British Empire,
Upon the Church of Christ.

The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.

John Bull has gone to India
And all must pay him heed
For histories are there to prove
That none of another breed
Has had a like inheritance,
Or sucked such milk as he,
And there's no luck about a house
If it lack honesty.

The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.

I poked about a village church
And found his family tomb
And copied out what I could read
In that religious gloom;
Found many a famous man there;
But fame and virtue rot.
Draw round beloved and bitter men,
Draw round and raise a shout;
The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.

— “The Ghost of Roger Casement,” Yeats, pub. 1938 (Finneran 306-07)

April came, with all plans in place to continue. MacNeill found out about the insurrection planned for Easter, and at first he agreed. Then he changed his mind and completely forbade it; but at that point, his efforts only succeeded in delaying it for one day.³¹⁴ On April the 23rd, the day they would have attacked, Patrick Pearse was named “Commandant-General of the Army of the Irish Republic and President of the Provisional Government” by the IRB military council.³¹⁵ The next day, Pearse read the “Proclamation of the Irish republic in front of the General Post Office,

314 Connolly, “rising of 1916,” 514

315 Tomás O’Riordan, “Patrick Henry Pearse,” Multitext

which the Risers had chosen for their headquarters, and the rebellion began.³¹⁶

I have met them at close of day
 Coming with vivid faces
 From counter or from desk among grey
 Eighteenth-century houses.
 I have passed with a nod of the head
 Or polite meaningless words,
 And thought before I had done
 Of a mocking tale or a gibe
 To please a companion
 Around the fire at the club,
 Being certain that they and I
 But lived where motley is worn:
 All changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
 In ignorant good will,
 Her nights in argument
 Until her voice grew shrill.
 What voice more sweet than hers
 When young and beautiful,
 She rode to harriers?

(Countess Markievicz)

This man had kept a school
 And rode our winged horse;
 This other his helper and friend
 Was coming into his force;
 He might have won fame in the end,
 So sensitive his nature seemed,
 So daring and sweet his thought.
 This other man I had dreamed
 A drunken, vain-glorious lout.
 He had done most bitter wrong
 To some who are near my heart,
 Yet I number him in the song;
 He, too, has resigned his part
 In the casual comedy;
 He, too, has been changed in his turn,
 Transformed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born.

(Patrick Pearse)

(Thomas MacDonagh)

(John MacBride [Maud's husband])

Hearts with one purpose alone
 Through summer and winter seem
 Enchanted to a stone
 To trouble the living stream.
 The horse that comes from the road,
 The rider, the birds that range

From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse splashes within it
Where long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call.
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of it all.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know that they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse —
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

— “Easter, 1916,” Yeats, writ. 1916 / pub. 1922³¹⁷

Two days later, the British army imposed martial law in and around Dublin.³¹⁸ The Rising leaders surrendered after three more days, on the 29th, and were shortly sentenced to death at Kilmainham Gaol.³¹⁹ Pearse, after his court martial, assured his judges, “You cannot conquer Ireland. You cannot extinguish the Irish passion of freedom. If our deed has not been sufficient to

317 Pethica 73-75

318 Evans Lecture 11

319 Ibid.

win freedom, then our children will win it by a better deed.”³²⁰ Eamon de Valera narrowly escaped execution because of his American birth; Britain did not want to alienate America at this point in the War.³²¹ Pearse was executed on May 3rd,³²² and James Connolly nine days later, as General Maxwell wanted to make the rebels an example by prolonging their executions (ironically giving them just what they wanted).³²³

The sixteen executions were recognized by the surrounding countries as a bad move and a wider wedge driven in future Anglo-Irish relations; the whole movement had already exacerbated Ireland and Britain's difficulty in trusting each other.³²⁴ In contrast to the general horror, James Stephens “was convinced that, 'The blood of brave men had to sanctify such a consummation if the national imagination was to be stirred to the dreadful business which is the organizing of freedom.’”³²⁵

Despite the tragedy of the previous year and the unbearable resulting tension in Ireland, attention had to be paid to the separatist movement and the pending independence negotiations. An Irish Convention was called in June 1917 to mediate between the Unionist and the Nationalist groups, but Sinn Féin declined to attend. Instead they formed their own government. In October, Eamon de Valera was elected president and Arthur Griffith vice president of a now fully political and activist Sinn Féin.³²⁶ John Redmond, the most conciliatory force in the whole debate, died the following March.³²⁷ Britain then made the unpopular decision to introduce the draft in Ireland that October, since the German military threat had increased in France. In April 1918, the Convention was still trying to find a national settlement to the Home Rule question. Nearly two thirds of the delegates voted for an independent dominion status, with the opposing minority comprised, unshockingly, of Ulster Unionists.³²⁸ The Irish Party finally walked out of the House of Commons after Parliament granted the government power to order conscription without a prior vote.³²⁹ Sinn Féin united with the trade unions to call a strike in protest of

320 O’Riordan, “Pearsé,” Multitext

321 Evans Lecture 11

322 O’Riordan, “Pearsé,” Multitext

323 Evans Lecture 11

324 Ward 109-13

325 Ibid. 153

326 Ibid. 116

327 Ibid. 114

328 Ibid.

329 Ibid. 119

utter savages.”²⁵¹ Hyde believed that Ireland already had a highly developed culture before St. Patrick ever arrived, which prepared the nation for the scholarly explosion that Christianity brought.²⁵² He addressed the question of historical reliability by assuring readers that he only selected those ancient sources of which he felt he could be sure, due to the cautiousness and diligence of their own scholarship — recording time by verifiable natural events such as eclipses and comets,²⁵³ and submitting their work to inspection by the national historians of the time as well as “the jealous eyes of rivals.”²⁵⁴ He was very fair in supposing (reasonably) that many of the genealogical origin stories to which the early Irish clung and for which they named their landmarks are a mixture of ancient pagan myths and Christian attempts to reconcile these myths with recorded history.²⁵⁵ He elaborated:

The early literature of Ireland is so bound up with the early history, and the history so bound up and associated with tribal names, memorial sites, patronymics, and topographical nomenclature, that it presents a kind of heterogeneous whole, that which is recognised history running into and resting upon suspected or often evident myth, while tribal patronymics and national genealogies abut upon both, and the whole is propped and supported by legions of place-names still there to testify, as it were, to the truth of all.²⁵⁶

He noted during his research “the almost universal diffusion of a traditional literary taste and a love of literature in the abstract amongst all classes of the native Irish. The whole history of Irish literature shows how warmly the efforts of all who assisted in its production were appreciated.”

²⁵⁷ Both Yeats and Hyde observed that Irish-speaking areas maintained the strongest storytelling tradition. Yeats took from this that the stories themselves were the threads that wove the people together, while Hyde concluded that story and tongue together must be the magic cocktail.

The activists were growing restless during this literature-dominated phase; at the start of the twentieth century, Clan na Gael rededicated itself to revolutionary Fenianism. Arthur Griffith founded Cumann na nGaedheal, the political arm to enact the ideas he expressed in his

251 Ibid. xxxvi-xxxvii

252 Ibid. 133-34

253 Ibid. 38-43

254 Ibid. 73-74

255 Ibid. 44-55

256 Ibid. 56

257 Ibid. xxxiii-xxxiv

the draft.³³⁰

By the next May, Britain had had enough of trying to conciliate a willfully disunited Ireland *and* stay ahead of the war in Europe. Lord French was made lord lieutenant of Ireland, who soon forbade many nationalist groups from meeting and allowed the arrests of Sinn Féin leaders in an unjustified atmosphere of martial law.³³¹ He invented a conspiracy between the Irish and the Germans to rationalize some of these measures.³³² World War I ended in November, so there was no longer a need for Britain to take such a draconian hand in administering Ireland.³³³ General elections were held in December, and Sinn Féin trounced the remainder of the Irish Party, which now appeared too moderate to be effective in procuring Irish rights.³³⁴

January 1919 was when the Sinn Féiners who had won the elections the previous month would go to take their seats in Parliament; but they chose instead to meet as the Irish parliament Dáil Éireann, setting up a skeletal Irish government with Eamon de Valera as the first minister (Príomh-Aire) and gradually supplanting British courts with native Irish ones throughout the nationalist districts they controlled.³³⁵ One of the things that the Dáil made sure to do was to establish a Ministry for Irish, ensuring that their national language would not go overlooked in their own government.³³⁶ All of this was done, however, without the approval of Britain, which was still officially in control of Ireland, so the new government was hardly in a secure position yet. Michael Collins, underground Ireland's finance minister, consolidated the Irish Volunteers and the IRB into the Irish Republican Army, which was ready to employ practical guerrilla tactics against the Unionists or the British.³³⁷ These new hostilities lasted until late 1920, with the IRA and Britain's Black and Tans showing horrible levels of brutality toward each other and toward civilians.³³⁸ Finally Parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act in December that created subordinate Northern and Southern Parliaments in Belfast and Dublin, with both bodies furnishing members for a Council of Ireland that was to prepare the island for united self-

330 Ibid. 118

331 Ibid. 120

332 Ibid. 122

333 Ibid. 120

334 Ibid. 120-21

335 Ibid. 123-24

336 Brown 39

337 Ward 124-25

338 Ibid. 126-27

government once again.³³⁹

Ulster elected a Unionist majority to its Parliament in May 1921. A Sinn Féin majority was elected in the South and abandoned the Dublin Parliament for the Dáil Éireann, forcing Great Britain to treat Southern Ireland as a colony.³⁴⁰ Amid further terrorist acts by the IRA, and Eamon de Valera's refusal to accept any terms from Prime Minister David Lloyd George but an independent Ireland not subject to the British commonwealth, Michael Collins and Vice President Griffith were forced to lead a delegation to London on their own to try to come to a settlement.³⁴¹ By December, Lloyd George had intimidated them into signing his treaty, which left Britain's naval bases intact in Southern Ireland and allowed Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom.³⁴² Thus, Partition went into effect.³⁴³ “[The treaty] was 'not the ultimate freedom that all nations aspire and develop to, but the freedom to achieve it,' Collins insisted.”³⁴⁴

The Dáil Éireann approved this treaty by a close majority in January 1922.³⁴⁵ Another civil war broke out between those who saw the treaty as a necessary evil and those who felt that the delegates should have held out for better terms. Collins used the IRA to eradicate the protesters, who eventually surrendered in May 1923. One of the first distinctions for the new Irish Free State was Yeats's 1923 Nobel Prize for literature, though the occasion was blotted by Catholic condemnations that his work was too “pagan.”³⁴⁶ He had also been elected to the Free State senate in 1922, where he served until 1928.³⁴⁷ The new government's mission statement declared its intention to support schools in Gaeltachts and to promulgate Irish throughout the rest of the academic system. Much of higher education came to depend on the students' proficiency in Irish.³⁴⁸ Membership in the Gaelic League, meanwhile, began to drop, now that the state was advancing their chief objectives.³⁴⁹

Brown calls the cheerless years following civil war and independence “[t]he dissipation

339 Ibid. 131-32

340 Ibid. 132

341 Ibid. 133-34

342 Ibid. 134-35

343 Ibid. vi, 135

344 Ibid. 135

345 Ibid.

346 Brown 56-57

347 Pethica 492

348 Brown 39-40

349 Ibid. 43-44

of revolutionary aspiration in postrevolutionary disillusionment.”³⁵⁰

While the struggle against England continued, the image of Cuchulain as the Hound of Ulster and the Fenian heroes as an exemplary Irish militia bore on contemporary experience with a striking pertinence, charging the work of even minor writers with national significance. In the wake of the civil war, in a period of prudent recovery, images of heroic life began to seem like Irish stage properties, employed in literature when ceremony demanded. There was a general sense that the heroic age had passed.³⁵¹

Now that she was once again responsible to govern herself, Ireland outgrew her bedtime stories. Having tired of gods and fighting men, the newly independent Irish patriotic author returned to the earlier trope of idealizing simple Irish country life, as if land scarcity had never been an issue, and the Great Hunger and subsequent slow modernization had never happened.³⁵² The extreme western Gaeltacht — Connacht, the Aran Islands, etc — bore the brunt of artistic Irish curiosity about their “true” origins, their “true” culture, what their Irish roots “really” looked like.³⁵³ This new creative environment had little room for the descendants of Protestant England, much to Yeats's dismay.³⁵⁴ AE (George Russell), a prominent Anglo-Irish literary man, observed that Standish O'Grady's life work of mythography might be seen as a waste by up-and-coming men of science;³⁵⁵ while Yeats discovered in Augustus John's 1930 portrait of him an “Anglo-Irish solitude, a solitude I have made for myself, an outlawed solitude.”³⁵⁶

By 1932, Southern Ireland felt independent enough as a dominion that the Dáil Éireann abandoned its oath of loyalty to the British Crown without fear of reprisal.³⁵⁷ There was a new constitution in 1937, and the Irish Free State was renamed Éire.³⁵⁸ Yeats wrote,

Sometimes I am told in commendation, if the newspaper is Irish, in condemnation if English, that my movement perished under the firing squads of 1916; sometimes that those firing squads made our realistic movement possible. If that statement is true, and it is only so in part, for romance was everywhere receding, it is because in the imagination of Pearse and his fellow soldiers the Sacrifice of the Mass had found the Red

350 Ibid. 13

351 Ibid. 64

352 Ibid. 65-71

353 Ibid. 72-75, 76

354 Ibid. 83-84

355 Ibid. 64-65

356 Pethica 255-56

357 Ward 139

358 Ward 139

Branch in the tapestry; they went out to die calling upon Cuchulain: —

Fall, Hercules, from Heaven in tempests hurled
To cleanse the beastly stable of this world.

In one sense the poets of 1916 were not of what the newspapers call my school. The Gaelic League, made timid by a modern popularisation of Catholicism sprung from the aspidistra and not from the root of Jesse, dreaded intellectual daring and stuck to dictionary and grammar. Pearse and MacDonagh and others among the executed men would have done, or attempted, in Gaelic what we did or attempted in English.³⁵⁹

Despite Yeats's insinuations against the bravery and competence of the Gaelic League, Douglas Hyde was elected the first president of Éire in 1938.³⁶⁰

Poetically, 1939 was an existential year for Yeats. He published "Man and the Echo," in which he asks himself several painful questions and is given only nonsense in reply.

MAN

In a cleft that's christened Alt
Under broken stone I halt
At the bottom of a pit
That broad noon has never lit
And shout a secret to the stone.
All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked?
And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.

ECHO

Lie down and die.

MAN

That were to shirk
The spiritual intellect's great work
And shirk it in vain. There is no release

359 Pethica 305

360 Connolly, "Hyde," 265

In a bodkin or disease,
 Nor can there be a work so great
 As that which cleans man's dirty slate.
 While man can still his body keep
 Wine or love drug him to sleep,
 Waking he thanks the Lord that he
 Has body and its stupidity,
 But body gone he sleeps no more
 And till his intellect grows sure
 That all's arranged in one clear view
 Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
 Then stands in judgment on his soul,
 And, all work done, dismisses all
 Out of intellect and sight
 And sinks at last into the night.

ECHO

Into the night.

MAN

O rocky voice
 Shall we in that great night rejoice?
 What do we know but that we face
 One another in this place?
 But hush, for I have lost the theme
 Its joy or night seem but a dream;
 Up there some hawk or owl has struck
 Dropping out of sky or rock,
 A stricken rabbit is crying out
 And its cry distracts my thought.³⁶¹

He had a "crisis of conscience" over how great a role he played in the Easter Rising, considering that his 1902 play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* seemed to call explicitly for military resistance to English domination. National Library of Ireland historians consider this fear "over-scrupulous," reminding the reader that "Yeats was but one of a number of forces contributing to the formation of the new Irish sense of national identity, and to the new sense of confidence which would induce some to strive for a new Ireland."³⁶² On the loss that he felt of his poetic genius, since his most famous subjects were no longer relevant, he meditated in "The Circus Animals' Desertion."

I

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
 I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
 Maybe at last being but a broken man

³⁶¹ Pethica 127-28

³⁶² "W.B. Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival," National Library of Ireland

I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

II

What can I but enumerate old themes,
First that sea-rider Usheen led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;
But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his fairy bride.

And then a counter-truth filled, out its play,
"The Countess Cathleen" was the name I gave it,
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchullain fought the ungovernable sea;
Heart mysteries there, and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.

III

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, and that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.³⁶³

William Butler Yeats died on January 28, 1939.³⁶⁴ In 1949, Éire was recognized as the Republic

363 Pethica 128-29

364 Ibid. 493

of Ireland and left the British commonwealth.³⁶⁵

Even this surface-level overview of Ireland's history has been an exhausting ride. For an entire country to have lived through it, then, requires a hardihood of spirit that this academic exercise cannot capture as easily as the date of a battle. What glues any group of people together, if not the memories they share from the time their acquaintance began? History is merely cultural memory, and myth is cultural imagination. When these two combine as legend, the product is a folklore of which an entire nation can be proud. W.B. Yeats sought to remember and imagine *with* his people, thereby helping them to do the same when nothing but their present troubles seemed worth focusing on. He may have been unsatisfied with his outcome; but no artist can live up to his own expectations, and no poet's love can be given to a greater country.

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